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Events, Opportunities

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HEADLINE	12/06 Google, Uber delay office returns
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2021/12/06/omicron-return-to-office/
GIST	For companies whose employees are still toiling from their couches at home, the question of when to bring their full workforces back to the office has become even trickier.

In a pandemic when many decisions have hinged on risk tolerance, the questions around the coronavirus's new omicron variant has complicated the process of calculating those hazards. Major corporations that had planned to shepherd all their employees back into offices in early 2022 now have to decide whether those dates make sense in light of further evidence of the pandemic's unpredictability.

"There remains so much uncertainty, and uncertainty equals instability," said Lars Schmidt, an author and podcast host who focuses on the future of work. "So when you're trying to pretend that doesn't exist and push people back into something they're not ready for, you're going to be met with resistance from employees."

Last week, Google and Uber became some of the first major employers in the United States to announce that they would postpone their Jan. 10 return date – not to another specific day, but indefinitely. Ford Motor Co. said Monday that it was pushing its expected return from January to March.

Several other major companies said they had no updates on their plans to return to their offices early next year or did not respond to inquiries from The Washington Post.

The question of when to return to offices is a niche problem. Most Americans already have returned to their workplaces or have worked on site throughout the pandemic. About 11 percent of U.S. workers were teleworking because of the coronavirus as of November, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Worldwide, many of those who have worked from home in the past year and a half are in the scientific, technical or financial services industries.

Those workers' employers face a timing conundrum: Employees want and expect advance notice if their return-to-office plans will change, but much about omicron will remain unknown for weeks. Scientists are racing to discover whether the mutation-riddled variant will prove more transmissible, virulent or capable of evading the body's immune defenses compared with other variants.

Alanah Mitchell, a professor of information systems at Drake University, said it's logical for companies to avoid setting new return dates for now, since many have postponed multiple times.

"The decision to say, 'We're not sure when we're going to be back' is a good decision because it's a little bit more honest," said Mitchell, who has written about the future of work.

More companies may follow suit, which Schmidt said would be a positive development. Repeatedly setting new return dates, he said, gives employees "whiplash" and forces them to manage constantly changing logistics around transportation, child care and other parts of their lives. Leaving the time frame open-ended offers employees more peace of mind, he said.

Conversations about where employees will work are taking place against a troubling backdrop for companies that recently have lost employees who want a more meaningful mission, better compensation or less grueling hours. Companies with an unstable working environment or that are forcing employees back into offices against their wishes risk seeing their staffs shrink amid what some have termed this year's "Great Resignation," Schmidt said.

In a Gallup poll published in October, 54 percent of employees who are working remotely at least part of the time said they wanted to split their time between working at home and in an office, 37 percent said they hoped to work from home exclusively and 9 percent said they wanted to work from an office full-time.

"The challenge of this moment is there are some employees who are desperate to go back; there are some who will never go back," Schmidt said. "The companies that . . . publicly commit to flexibility in those constructs are the ones that will be at an advantage in this time where there's so much talent and mobility."

In the absence of certainty around the future of their physical workplaces, AJ Thomas said many companies are emphasizing their guiding principles to employees – such as regular coronavirus testing or

	<p>remote work on Fridays – rather than setting immovable return dates. Most corporate leaders are trying to consistently convey their companies’ values in their communications with staff about going back to offices, said Thomas, who studies employee experience and is a leadership coach at the WKND WSDM Lab.</p> <p>“Knowing that the constraint here is that the date may always move because there may be other factors out there,” she said, “I think the majority of leaders are saying, ‘What is the consistent thing that we can communicate to provide some stability to our employee base?’ “</p>
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HEADLINE	12/07 Other countries follow US boycott?
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/07/world/asia/us-boycott-beijing-olympics-reaction.html?action=click&module=Well&pgtype=Homepage&section=World%20News
GIST	<p>SEOUL — Neither President Biden nor other American officials are going, but the Russian leader might. New Zealand says it decided months ago that its diplomats wouldn’t be attending. Political leaders of other nations are expected to bow out, too, whether they announce an explicit reason or not.</p> <p>In less than two months, China will open the 24th Winter Olympics in Beijing under the shadow of the coronavirus pandemic and now also a diplomatic boycott intended to protest the host country’s repressive policies.</p> <p>The White House announcement on Monday that it would send no official delegation prompted anger in Beijing, where Chinese officials on Tuesday once again vowed to retaliate.</p> <p>“This will only make people see the sinister intentions of the American side and will only make the American side lose more morality and credibility,” said a spokesman for China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Zhao Lijian.</p> <p>A prominent columnist for state media, Chen Weihua of China Daily, bitingly expressed hope that Mr. Biden would live long enough to see China boycott the Summer Olympics to be held in Los Angeles in 2028.</p> <p>Although the effect of Mr. Biden’s decision on other countries remains to be seen, several have already signaled that they, too, will seek ways to express displeasure with China’s policies while stopping short of prohibiting athletes from attending.</p> <p>The decision will be especially complicated for European nations, which have sharply criticized China’s abuses of human rights and democracy in Hong Kong and Xinjiang.</p> <p>The European Union has just renewed for another year the business and travel restrictions it imposed a year ago on officials involved in the crackdown on Uyghurs and other Muslims in Xinjiang.</p> <p>And in July, the European Parliament, which often takes strong moral positions, overwhelmingly passed a nonbinding resolution calling on diplomatic officials to boycott the Winter Olympics “unless the Chinese Government demonstrates a verifiable improvement in the human rights situation in Hong Kong, the Xinjiang Uyghur Region, Tibet, Inner Mongolia and elsewhere in China.”</p> <p>At the same time, many European nations have extensive trade ties with Beijing that they do not want to jeopardize, especially for a measure that is likely only to offend China, not change it.</p> <p>An official response on Tuesday from the European Commission, the European Union’s executive arm, to a question about the boycott offered no support for the American position.</p> <p>Major sporting events like the Olympics, with their universal audiences, “can be instrumental for spreading positive values and promoting freedom and human rights at global level,” the commission said</p>

in a statement. “We are ready to contribute to that end. However, such platforms should not be used for political propaganda.”

Attendance at the Olympics in whatever form is a decision for individual member states, which are sure to be divided on this issue, as on much else.

Italy would not join the American boycott, an Italian government official said on Tuesday, while France, Germany and Britain were noncommittal.

If the Italian position changes, however, it will be a direct blow to Beijing. Italy will host the Winter Games in 2026 and would be expected by Olympic tradition to send official emissaries to these Games, accepting the baton, as it were, from one host to another.

Only a handful of world leaders attended the Summer Games in Tokyo, which were held after a year’s delay because of the coronavirus pandemic. They included President Emmanuel Macron of France, whose country will host the next Summer Olympics in Paris in 2024, and he may be expected to attend these games because of protocol.

His office said on Tuesday that Mr. Macron had taken note of the U.S. diplomatic boycott and that France would “coordinate at the European level” on the issue, Agence France-Presse reported.

“When we have concerns about human rights we let the Chinese know,” Mr. Macron’s office said. “We took sanctions related to Xinjiang last March.”

Germany has not sworn in its new government yet, and while the coalition is expected to take a somewhat tougher line on China, Olaf Scholz, the incoming chancellor, refused to provide an answer on Tuesday. At a news conference, after a third question on the topic, he simply said, “We think it’s important to do everything you can to make the world work together internationally.”

Britain has made no decision on a diplomatic boycott either, but there are calls from within the ruling Conservative Party to do so.

Iain Duncan Smith, a former leader of the party and a vocal critic of Beijing’s policies, welcomed the U.S. announcement and urged Britain to follow suit.

The British government “needs to do the same and announce a diplomatic boycott of the Beijing Winter Olympics,” Mr. Duncan Smith wrote on Twitter, adding in another post that many in Parliament favor such a move.

The British government’s approach to China has been toughening amid growing tension over Chinese policy in its former colony, Hong Kong, a direct embarrassment to London. Speaking before the U.S. announcement, Britain’s deputy prime minister and former foreign secretary, Dominic Raab, told LBC News: “I can tell you categorically I will not be attending the Winter Olympic Games.”

China’s critics praised the White House for focusing international attention on China’s long record of human rights abuses. Those include crackdowns in Tibet and Hong Kong, as well as in Xinjiang, where more than a million Uyghurs and other Muslims have cycled through mass detention and re-education camps.

The International Campaign for Tibet said in a statement that a boycott was “the right choice both morally and strategically.”

Canada and Australia, both of which have tangled diplomatically with China this year, are also considering whether to join the boycott.

“Australia must not be complacent but move ahead with speed to demonstrate our long commitment to upholding human rights and calling out where they are breached,” Eric Abetz, a senator from that country’s governing Liberal Party, said in a statement. He has been calling for a diplomatic boycott since last year.

Although the American decision had been expected and, administration officials said, conveyed to Beijing in advance of Monday’s announcement, the Communist Party government appeared flustered, as well as angered.

Censors appeared to bar searches online for the word “boycott,” while initial reports in state media focused on statements by Chinese officials calling the efforts a politicization of a sporting event in violation of the Olympic spirit.

Officials in Beijing last week tried to pre-empt any prospect of a diplomatic boycott by saying they would not extend invitations to foreign leaders to attend the Winter Games, leaving that task to national Olympic committees around the world instead.

That, however, contradicted a statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs last month that the Russian president, Vladimir V. Putin, would attend at the invitation of China’s leader, Xi Jinping. Mr. Xi attended the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympics in Sochi in 2014 at a time when Russia, too, faced diplomatic boycotts.

For many countries, especially China’s Asian neighbors, the question of how to engage with Beijing around the Olympic Games has been fraught. Given the diplomatic sensitivities, some nations have sidestepped any explicit rebuke of Beijing.

Prime Minister Fumio Kishida of Japan said on Tuesday that his country had not yet decided who would represent the country in Beijing, though some lawmakers have called for a boycott because of human rights abuses, territorial disputes and Chinese aggression in regional seas.

New Zealand said that it had also expressed concerns about human rights in China, but that it would not send top officials mostly because of the pandemic.

The obstacles to attending the Beijing Olympics are not just diplomatic.

China has very stringent quarantine rules, requiring everyone who enters the country to spend two weeks in isolation, followed by a week or two of daily health monitoring at home or a hotel, with many restrictions on travel and social interactions.

The annoyances of the pandemic could diminish attendance, as they did in Tokyo. They could also give cover to nations that would simply rather not attend.

Mr. Putin, an avid sportsman and an increasingly close ally of Mr. Xi’s, has not yet given final confirmation of his attendance despite China’s public statement last month that he would attend the opening ceremony, to be held on Feb. 4 in Beijing’s National Stadium, popularly known as the Bird’s Nest.

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HEADLINE	12/07 China claims itself as a democracy
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/07/world/asia/china-biden-democracy-summit.html
GIST	BEIJING — As President Biden prepares to host a “ summit for democracy ” this week, China has counterattacked with an improbable claim: It’s a democracy, too. No matter that the Communist Party of China rules the country’s 1.4 billion people with no tolerance for opposition parties; that its leader, Xi Jinping, rose to power through an opaque political process without

popular elections; that [publicly calling for democracy in China](#) is punished harshly, often with long prison sentences.

“There is no fixed model of democracy; it manifests itself in many forms,” the State Council, China’s top governing body, argued in a position paper it released over the weekend titled “China: Democracy That Works.”

It is unlikely that any democratic country will be persuaded by China’s model. By any measure except its own, China is one of the least democratic countries in the world, sitting near the bottom of lists ranking political and personal freedoms.

Even so, the government is banking on its message finding an audience in some countries disillusioned by liberal democracy or by American-led criticism — whether in Latin America, Africa or Asia, including in China itself.

“They want to put on a back foot, put on the defensive, what they refer to as Western democracy,” said Jean-Pierre Cabestan, a political scientist at Hong Kong Baptist University.

China’s paper on democracy was the latest salvo in a weekslong campaign seeking to undercut Mr. Biden’s virtual gathering, which begins on Thursday.

In speeches, articles and videos on state television, officials have extolled what they call Chinese-style democracy. At the same time, Beijing has criticized democracy in the United States in particular as deeply flawed, seeking to undermine the Biden administration’s moral authority as it works to rally the West to counter China.

“Democracy is not an ornament to be used for decoration; it is to be used to solve the problems that the people want to solve,” Mr. Xi said at a gathering of top Communist Party leaders in October, according to Xinhua, the state news agency. (In the same address, he ridiculed the “song and dance” that voters are given during elections, contending that voters have little influence until the next campaign.)

On Sunday, the foreign ministry released another report that criticized American politics for what it described as the corrupting influence of money, the deepening social polarization and the inherent unfairness of the Electoral College. In the same way, officials later sought to play down the White House [announcement](#) that no American officials would attend the Winter Olympics in Beijing in February by saying none had been invited anyway.

China’s propaganda offensive has produced some eyebrow-raising claims about the fundamental nature of Communist Party rule and the superiority of its political and social model. It also suggests that Beijing may be insecure about how it is perceived by the world.

“The fact that the regime feels the need to consistently justify its political system in terms of democracy is a powerful acknowledgment of the symbolism and legitimacy that the term holds,” said Sarah Cook, an analyst who covers China for Freedom House, an advocacy group in Washington.

When officials introduced the government’s policy paper on Saturday, they seemed to compete over who could mention “democracy” more often, while muddying the definition of the word.

China’s system “has achieved process democracy and outcome democracy, procedural democracy and substantive democracy, direct democracy and indirect democracy, and the unity of people’s democracy and the will of the country,” said Xu Lin, deputy director of the Communist Party Central Committee’s propaganda department.

The campaign carries echoes of the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union, which sparred for decades over the merits of their political systems, said Charles Parton, a China specialist at the Royal United Services Institute, a British research group.

“They are more keen, in a way, on an ideological competition, and that takes you back to the Cold War,” Mr. Parton said, referring to China.

Mr. Biden’s democracy summit, which administration officials have said is not explicitly focused on China, has also faced criticism, in the West as well as from China, in part for whom it invited and whom it left out.

Angola, Iraq and Congo, countries that Freedom House classifies as undemocratic, will participate, while two NATO allies, Turkey and Hungary, will not.

In a move likely to anger Beijing, the White House also invited two officials from Taiwan, the island democracy China claims as its own; and Nathan Law, a former legislator in the semiautonomous territory of Hong Kong who sought asylum in Britain after China’s crackdown.

At the heart of Beijing’s defense of its political system are several core arguments, some more plausible than others.

Officials cite the elections that are held in townships or neighborhoods to select representatives to the lowest of five levels of legislatures. Those votes, however, are highly choreographed, and any potential candidates who disagree with the Communist Party face harassment or worse.

The legislatures then each choose delegates for the next level, up to the National People’s Congress, a parliamentary body with nearly 3,000 members that meets each spring to rubber-stamp decisions made behind closed doors by the party leadership.

When Mr. Xi [pushed through a constitutional amendment](#) removing term limits on the presidency — effectively allowing him to rule indefinitely — the vote, by secret ballot, was 2,958 to 2.

China has also accused the United States of imposing Western values on other cultures, an argument that might resonate in regions where the two powers are competing for influence.

China’s ambassador to the United States, Qin Gang, recently joined his Russian counterpart, Anatoly Antonov, to [denounce](#) Mr. Biden’s summit as hypocritical and hegemonic. Writing in *The National Interest*, the conservative magazine, they alluded to support for democratic movements in authoritarian countries that became known as “color revolutions.”

“No country has the right to judge the world’s vast and varied political landscape by a single yardstick,” they wrote.

Pointing to the ways that American and other Western societies have been torn by political, social and racial divisions and hobbled by the coronavirus pandemic, China is also arguing that its form of governance has been more effective in creating prosperity and stability.

As officials often note, China has achieved more than four decades of rapid economic growth. More recently, it has contained the coronavirus outbreak that began in Wuhan, with fewer deaths throughout the pandemic than some countries have had in a single day.

Skeptics reject the argument that such successes make China a democracy.

They cite surveys like the one done by the University of Würzburg in Germany, which ranks countries [based on variables](#) like independence of the judiciary, freedom of the press and integrity of elections. The most recent put China near the bottom among 176 countries. Only Saudi Arabia, Yemen, North Korea and Eritrea rank lower. Denmark is first; the United States 36th.

In China, the Communist Party controls the courts and heavily censors the media. It has suppressed Tibetan culture and language, restricted religious freedom and carried out a vast detention campaign in Xinjiang.

What's more, China's vigorous defense of its system in recent months has done nothing to moderate its prosecution of dissent.

Two of China's most prominent human rights lawyers, [Xu Zhiyong](#) and [Ding Jiaxi](#), are expected to face trial at the end of this year on charges that they called for more civil liberties, according to Jerome Cohen, a law professor specializing in China at New York University. A Chinese employee of Bloomberg News in Beijing has [remained in detention](#) for a year, as of Tuesday, with almost no word about the accusations against her.

Under Mr. Xi's rule, intellectuals are now warier of speaking their minds in China than at practically any time since Mao Zedong died in 1976.

"This is an extraordinary time in the Chinese experience," Mr. Cohen said. "I really think that the totalitarianism definition applies."

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HEADLINE	12/07 Pandemic-era 'excess savings' dwindling
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/07/business/pandemic-savings.html
GIST	<p>Infusions of government cash that warded off an economic calamity have left millions of households with bigger bank balances than before the pandemic — savings that have driven a torrent of consumer spending, helped pay off debts and, at times, reduced the urgency of job hunts.</p> <p>But many low-income Americans find their savings dwindling or even depleted. And for them, the economic recovery is looking less buoyant.</p> <p>Over the past 18 months or so, experts have been closely tracking the multitrillion-dollar increase in what economists call "excess savings," generally defined as the amount by which people's cash reserves during the Covid-19 crisis exceeded what they would have normally saved.</p> <p>According to Moody's Analytics, an economic research firm, these excess savings among many working- and middle-class households could be exhausted as soon as early next year — not only reducing their financial cushions but also potentially affecting the economy, since consumer spending is such a large share of activity.</p> <p>In April 2020, after the pandemic's outset, the nation's personal saving rate — the percentage of overall disposable income that goes into savings each month — jumped fourfold from its February 2020 level to 34 percent. Some of that spike in savings resulted from government checks of up to \$1,200 sent to most Americans; some simply stemmed from reduced spending by firmly middle-class or affluent households during lockdowns.</p> <p>The rate peaked again at 26 percent this past spring after another round of direct federal payments. But the personal saving rate doesn't account for how those savings are distributed. Wealthy households, for instance, have saved the most.</p> <p>"We do tend to see these broad-brush-stroke economic figures and assume that they apply to the broadest part of the populace," said Mark Hamrick, the senior economic analyst at Bankrate, a personal finance company. "There's a significant cross-section of the American public which is financially fragile."</p> <p>New research by the JPMorgan Chase Institute, which assesses the bank accounts of 1.6 million families, found that low-income families experienced the "greatest percent gains" during each round of stimulus,</p>

yet also exhausted their balances faster. That's in part because those households went into the crisis with the thinnest financial buffers.

The median balance among higher-income families (defined as those earning more than \$68,896) was roughly 40 percent higher in September than two years earlier. The typical low-income family (those earning less than \$30,296) experienced a much larger increase in relative terms — 70 percent — but that represented a total cash balance of only about \$1,000.

And households making \$30,296 to \$44,955 also made significant gains compared with 2019, yet typically had less than about \$1,300 in cash on hand. In a silver lining, the report found that the cash balances of families with children appear to have been helped by the three rounds of monthly child tax credit payments that began in July, which provided up to \$300 per child under 6 and up to \$250 per child 6 to 17.

"I've been trying to ask myself this question: Is this a lot or is this a little?" said Fiona Greig, a co-president of the JPMorgan Chase Institute. Ms. Greig said that when reviewing the data, she was torn between hope — when seeing that "families had a doubling of balances in some cases when they received their stimulus checks" — and disappointment knowing "there are some families for whom this is really all they have."

By October, the U.S. personal saving rate, which had peaked above 30 percent, had reverted to its December 2019 level of 7.3 percent.

Technically, most households are financially better off now than before the crisis [by several measures](#), an anomaly after a recession. Still, the fading impact of pandemic aid is quickly being felt. In July, [one in three Americans](#) reported having less money to fall back on in an emergency than before the pandemic, according to a Bankrate survey. Only one in six reported having more.

In a commentary published on a Federal Reserve Bank of New York blog in April, four economists argued that "although large by historical standards, the savings accumulated by U.S. households during the pandemic do not appear to be 'excessive' when set against the extraordinary need of many American families."

Millions of Americans could be buffeted by financial volatility again with little safeguard as new variants of the virus emerge. For some, that reality has already begun.

"It was hard even before the pandemic hit," said Maria Patton, a 57-year-old former real estate agent whose finances were ruined by a recent divorce. "And when the pandemic hit, it became impossible, almost."

Ms. Patton, who has a teenage son, had just been hired at Nordstrom in Los Angeles when the virus surged and she was laid off. Despite immediately applying for unemployment insurance in March 2020, she went more than two months without receiving benefits. She tried to find work as a nanny — which had been her most recent employment — but wound up moving home to Tennessee, where she figured the cost of living was more affordable.

As she was moving in the middle of last year, she received back payments for all the weeks she was eligible for Pandemic Unemployment Assistance — an emergency federal program to help freelancers and others who do not ordinarily qualify for state benefits — which amounted to a lump sum of \$15,000. Much of that cash, Ms. Patton says, went to paying down debt, as well as "paying for medical insurance out of my pocket" because she can't afford health care coverage, and living in a hotel because landlords in Nashville didn't like her credit situation.

Ms. Patton used more of her savings in January to move the two of them to Denver for a \$25-an-hour nanny job she found online, which went well until she got Covid-19 and had to quit. Now she and her son work for Amazon Fresh, the grocery delivery service, making \$15 an hour. Her savings dried up in September.

“Now, I’m right back where I was,” she said. “I feel like a loser. I feel like a failure.” Making too much to qualify for assistance but too little to afford stable housing, she fears she and her son will be living out of her car soon after the holidays.

The drawing down of households’ cash will test competing theories about the extent to which those savings have increased worker power and wages and how much they contributed to labor shortages, inflation and even supply chain snags.

There has been wide agreement among business leaders and economists that after decades of wage and income stagnation, the burst in savings has eased poverty while giving employees and job seekers more leverage. But there is less agreement about whether this development has had unintended, negative consequences.

The cash buffer “gives people some discretion over whether they take the first job that’s available or if they want to leave the work force altogether for a time,” said James K. Galbraith, a progressive economist at the University of Texas at Austin.

“There may well be long-term lasting benefits,” Dr. Galbraith argued. “If in the short run, in order to bring people back into the work force, employers raise the low wages that they’re offering, then they’re probably not going to be in a position to cut them” down the road.

Wages were up 4.8 percent overall in November from a year earlier and were much higher in sectors like leisure and hospitality.

Many investors and business owners are wary of these wage gains continuing, contending that companies may pass more of their labor costs on to customers and that they may threaten companies’ profitability — or even their viability. With job openings at record levels, a large share of business groups remain hopeful that more people will accept wages at their current levels as their savings diminish.

A crop of high-profile economists in both major political parties contend that measures like the aid package from the spring, while well intentioned and effective in warding off some impoverishment, have caused consumer spending to outstrip supply this year as the economy reopened, worsening inflation and straining supply chains.

“From a macroeconomic perspective, it would certainly be helpful if consumer demand were to cool off,” said Michael R. Strain, an economist at the American Enterprise Institute, a right-leaning think tank. “Rooting for low-income households to have less savings is not great, but I think it’s important to remember low-income households are the ones who are hurt the most by inflation. It doesn’t sit well thinking, ‘Boy, it’d be great if households burned through their excess savings.’ But we’re not in a normal period.”

A Bank of America report in November noted that price increases for some goods, especially in food and energy categories, were “cutting the spending power of less-educated households by 4.6 percent on an annualized basis, compared to 3 percent for more-educated households.”

Still, a [report from J.P. Morgan](#) points out that consumers are likely to “eat into their accumulated excess savings to offset rising prices,” suggesting that vulnerable households could potentially face an even greater inflation challenge if those savings were absent.

Moody’s Analytics estimated that there was still \$2.5 trillion left in overall excess savings as of October and that the total would decrease by \$50 billion a month on average through the end of next year — with the fastest declines among those with the lowest incomes.

That mathematical modeling, by its nature, renders in statistics what many are feeling in more palpable ways. “The people looking at the data aren’t the people trying to put food on the table,” said Ms. Patton,

	the real estate agent turned Amazon Fresh worker. “The people that are writing this and thinking this have never struggled right now.”
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HEADLINE	12/06 Tacoma obituary: before too late get vaxxed
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/health/a-beloved-tacoma-mother-and-friend-never-got-around-to-getting-a-covid-shot-with-her-death-her-family-hopes-others-will/
GIST	<p>Phone calls with Roselyn Knox could last forever.</p> <p>Whenever her niece was approaching the hospital to get results from her cancer tests, Knox was on the other end of the line, reminding her niece to breathe. When her son’s friend was waiting for her mother to come out of surgery, Knox kept the call going for more than an hour, bookended with prayers.</p> <p>“When I got my results back from the hospital, we wouldn’t talk about negativity,” her niece April Holt said. “We would just talk about what God says about who I am and how I could fight this and I could beat this. And I am still here, so it’s working.”</p> <p>Knox, a longtime Tacoma resident and founder of a Christian nonprofit aimed at women, died from complications related to COVID-19 on Oct. 12 at Madigan Army Medical Center. She was 70.</p> <p>Her son, Parissh Knox, added a line in her paid obituary encouraging those who loved her to not wait to get vaccinated:</p> <p><i>Roselyn’s family strongly recommends that attendees obtain their COVID-19 vaccine and booster shots for those who are privileged to get them. Talk to your medical provider for accurate information.</i></p> <p>Knox had been hesitant to get the vaccine, although her son later learned she may have been coming around to the idea. But it was too late.</p> <p>“I want people to know,” Parissh Knox, who lives in Los Angeles, said. “When you start knowing people who died from it, you take it a lot more seriously.”</p> <p>Knox was born in Ohio and grew up in Colorado, a talented violist who in high school was the only Black member of the All State Orchestra. She met her husband, Sylvester Knox, at a club in Colorado, and the two married in 1978. Knox didn’t think she could give birth to a child and thought it might be hard for a Black couple to adopt a child in the United States. So while they lived in Okinawa, Japan, where Sylvester was stationed, they adopted a 4-year-old boy from an orphanage.</p> <p>Later on, their son and his mom had an inside joke that, while he had two mothers, Knox was his “No. 1 mom.” Soon after the couple adopted Parissh, Knox unexpectedly became pregnant with their daughter, Marie Knox. The family moved to military bases abroad and throughout the United States, and settled in Tacoma in the 1980s.</p> <p>Their home was a “mishmash of cultures and life experiences,” Parissh Knox said, among diverse families who Knox would take in as her own. When Holt, her niece, was a child, she and her sister spent a few summers with the family. They were two “damaged, difficult and snotty-nosed” girls who were growing up in a tough environment in Chicago, but, Holt said, their saving grace was their aunt. She bought the tickets for Holt’s first airplane ride, took her on her first road trip and tailored Holt’s first designer clothes.</p> <p>Knox worked at range control on Joint Base Lewis McChord for 20 years, and founded a nonprofit called Women’s Ministry Plus You, dedicated to spreading the Christian gospel to women virtually. When her husband died in 2005, she doubled down on being open and supportive to others, Parissh Knox said. Her circle expanded even more when Marie died at 39 in 2018 from complications during a double-organ transplant surgery.</p>

“When you go through painful moments you understand how many people are struggling, and how many people have been through things,” Parissh Knox said.

Her son made a point to gather his friends together to hang out with his mom when she visited him in Los Angeles. Knox stayed in contact with several of those friends — more than a dozen traveled to Tacoma for her services. When Perla Aragon’s mom had surgery a few months ago, Knox made sure to call her.

“She encouraged me, and prayed with me, over and over,” Aragon said. “She was always someone who would pray for you, or pray with you.”

The phone calls became even more important, Knox’s loved ones said, during the pandemic. Knox took COVID precautions seriously, Parissh Knox said — her car was filled with various masks, hand sanitizers and gloves — and she tried to avoid going out, which was a strain for such a social person. But she wouldn’t give her son a straight answer when he mentioned he was vaccinated, and asked if she was, too. She originally said she was thinking about it and going to talk to her doctor.

Knox never explicitly said she was against the COVID vaccine, according to her cousin Robin Withers, but it wasn’t a topic she ever broached. Withers did talk to Knox about some of her concerns regarding the Black community and health inequities, such as the high infant mortality rate among Black mothers and history of experiments on Black people without their consent.

“I would never say ‘Roselyn, did you get vaccinated?’ but we talked about her concerns, and the history of people of color with vaccines,” said Withers, who called Knox her prayer warrior and close enough that she felt more like a sister than a cousin.

Parissh Knox came to visit his mom for her birthday in July, which they spent driving to her friends’ homes so she could give them little gifts, like plants and pie, rather than the other way around. Meanwhile, he kept urging her to get vaccinated, but he knew that as a son, he couldn’t force her. He visited again over Labor Day weekend, and the two had a great time, taking videos together in a park.

Soon after, following a church event she attended, she told her son she had a cold. He sent her a COVID test and pulse oximeter and called every day to check on her. He kept debating whether to fly from Los Angeles to see her, but a friend told him no, she was fine. Listen to your mom.

On Sept. 20, around 2:30 a.m., Knox texted her son, asking how to take the COVID test. An hour later, she told him she had tested positive. That day, she went to Madigan Army Medical Center, where she was put on a ventilator because her oxygen levels were so low. She died three weeks later.

“You don’t expect your friends to get COVID, and pass away because of COVID,” her friend Dale Golder said. “There was so much talk about it and getting vaccinated and all of that, to have Roz be one of my friends to get COVID and not make it out ... it’s just real traumatic that you lose so many people, and one of them is Roz.”

Knox’s death has led to her family taking a stronger pro-vaccination stance, Parissh Knox said, persuading some to get their initial doses or a booster. What his mom went through, he said, “is at the forefront of everyone’s mind” when they persuade others to get vaccinated and boosted, and to do it right away.

In the days after his mother’s death, Parissh Knox went through her cellphone. Her last Google search: Where to find a COVID vaccine.

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HEADLINE	12/07 Omicron more contagious, less dangerous?
SOURCE	https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/health/2021/12/07/omicron-coronavirus-variant-more-contagious-less-dangerous/8886726002/

Early reports from South Africa seem to indicate the [omicron](#) variant of coronavirus is much more contagious than previous variants while causing milder disease, though experts there warn definitive data won't be available for weeks.

"This virus comes with both barrels loaded – high infectivity and potentially the ability for immune evasion. But maybe what it's lacking is pathogenicity," said Dr. Warner Greene, director of the Center for HIV Cure Research at the Gladstone Institutes in San Francisco.

COVID-19 cases in South Africa's Gauteng province are doubling every day and 75% of infections are due to omicron. There is also a week-over-week increase in hospital admissions.

But so far there have not been an increase in deaths or even hospitalized people who require oxygen, said Greene, who spoke on a call with reporters Monday.

Currently, the global epicenter of omicron cases is the Tshwane district in the Gauteng province to the northeast of Johannesburg. Cases there have increased exponentially in the past several weeks, according to the South African Medical Research Council.

There are now early clinical reports out of hospitals in Gauteng that are emerging, and they are encouraging, Greene said.

"This it looks to be a highly infectious virus, but it may not be as virulent or as pathogenic as the delta variant," he said. But more data is needed to make any firm conclusions.

Even the feel of the hospitals is different this time, the research council's Dr. Fareed Abdullah wrote in a [post](#) on Saturday.

In all three previous COVID-19 waves in the country, "the COVID ward was recognizable by the majority of patients being on some form of oxygen supplementation with the incessant sound of high flow nasal oxygen machines, or beeping ventilator alarms."

Abdullah isn't convinced it's possible to know yet if omicron is milder by what's being seen today.

"This may be due to the usual lag between cases and deaths and the trend will become clearer over the next few weeks," he wrote.

Omicron is the most recently discovered variant of the SARS-CoV-2 virus that causes COVID-19. It first was first detected in southern Africa and named a "variant of concern" by the World Health Organization on Nov. 26.

As of Monday, it has been detected in more than 38 countries and [one-third of U.S. states](#).

The risk of reinfection with omicron

Omicron had more than [50 mutations](#) and appears to be far more contagious than the delta variant.

How well a disease can spread is defined by its basic reproductive number, sometimes written R_t .

For measles, the number is 12 to 18, meaning each person with measles on average infects 12 to 18 other people. The number for COVID-19 was originally estimated to be between 1.4 and 2.4, according to the [World Health Organization](#).

The R_t for the omicron variant appears to be about 3.5, said [Trevor Bedford](#), an evolutionary biologist at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle is tracking it.

"These are still very early estimates and all this will become more clear as we get comparable estimates from different geographies and with different methods," Bedford tweeted, noting the data he used is from South Africa.

"Even Rt of 3 is very high," he wrote. "I'm hoping that prior immunity protects against severe outcomes, but I'm very concerned about the size of the epidemic wave in the US and across the world."

A paper published Thursday from [data from South Africa's National Notifiable Medical Conditions Surveillance System](#) found that having been previously infected with COVID-19 was not as protective against omicron as it was with the beta and delta variants.

The paper, which has not yet been peer-reviewed, looked at the risk of reinfection. The study estimated that omicron may be twice as likely to cause reinfection as previous variants.

Overall, news of the variant's transmissibility and virulence could be good news, with the understanding that certainty is weeks away, say experts.

"It would be a great thing if, in fact, omicron crowded out delta. If omicron was a less pathogenic virus, that would be very good news for the human race," said Greene.

It also makes sense for the virus to evolve in the direction of being less dangerous, said Dr. Paul Offit, director of the Vaccine Education Center at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia

"It's never to the advantage of the virus to kill you," he said. "All viruses want to be the common cold, just give you the sniffles while you go around infecting others."

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HEADLINE	12/07 Survivors return to Pearl Harbor
SOURCE	https://www.upi.com/Top_News/US/2021/12/07/40-survivors-return-Pearl-Harbor-80th-anniversary/8091638845388/
GIST	<p>Dec. 7 (UPI) -- Dozens of survivors of the Japanese attack on the Pearl Harbor naval base in Hawaii will gather on Tuesday to mark the 80th anniversary of the event, which sent the United States into World War II.</p> <p>About 40 Pearl Harbor survivors and 110 World War II veterans will attend the 80th Remembrance Ceremony at Kilo Pier in Honolulu to commemorate the loss of 2,400 service members and civilians during the surprise Japanese attack on the island of Oahu on Dec. 7, 1941.</p> <p>"This year's ceremony -- 'Valor, Sacrifice, and Peace' -- honors the sacrifices of those who died in the attack while paying tribute to the allies' ultimate victory in WWII," the National Parks Service said in a statement.</p> <p>The event, which will include remarks by National Parks Service-Pearl Harbor National Memorial Superintendent Tom Leatherman and keynote speaker Secretary of the Navy Carlos Del Toro, will be live streamed beginning at 7:50 a.m. HST (12:50 p.m. EST)</p> <p>The event will also include a performance by the Pacific Fleet Band, a wreath presentation and a fly-over.</p> <p>Tuesday marks the return of surviving veterans, many of whom are now close to 100 years old, after a scaled-back ceremony last year due to the COVID-19 pandemic.</p> <p>In addition to the veterans, 800 members of the public were awarded seats to watch the live stream at the Pearl Harbor National Memorial's Visitor Center.</p>

	<p>The attack famously sank multiple battleships -- including the USS Arizona, USS Oklahoma, USS West Virginia and USS California -- and directly prompted the United States to enter World War II.</p> <p>Other events on Tuesday include a memorial ceremony for the 429 crew members killed on the USS Oklahoma and the reinternment of the 33 remaining unknown sailors on the ship.</p> <p>"Through the six-year effort of Project Oklahoma, 355 of 388 sailors and marines have been identified," the NPS said.</p> <p>The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor was one of the most significant events of the 20th century and effectively forced the United States to enter WWII.</p> <p>"A Japanese dive bomber, torpedo plane and parachute raid on the great American naval and air base [caused] heavy loss of life and property damage in an unprovoked assault which precipitated a general war in the Pacific," United Press, the forerunner to UPI, reported on the day of the attack.</p> <p>"Attacking planes, several of which were reported shot down, clearly bore the insignia of the rising sun."</p> <p>The event began nearly four years of war for the United States, until the end of WWII in the second half of 1945.</p> <p>"Dec. 7 was a catalyst that led to a changed world," Pacific Historic Parks said in a statement. "The 80th Commemoration will tell the story of the multi-pronged attack across the Pacific and in particular the attack on Pearl Harbor.</p> <p>"The goal of the commemoration is to ensure that future generations will understand the valor and legacy of those who perished and those who fought throughout the war. The commemoration also highlights the importance of the peace that brought reconciliation, a reconciliation that continues to move forward today in creating a better future for all."</p>
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HEADLINE	12/07 WHO Europe: vaccine mandates last resort
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/vaccine-mandates-absolute-last-resort-who-europe-head-says-2021-12-07/
GIST	<p>COPENHAGEN, Dec 7 (Reuters) - Mandatory vaccinations against the coronavirus are an "absolute last resort", the World Health Organization's top Europe official said on Tuesday.</p> <p>More and more countries in Europe, including Germany, are debating whether to make COVID-19 vaccines mandatory after Austria announced in November it would make inoculations compulsory as of Feb. 1 next year, prompting large protests.</p> <p>"Mandates around vaccination are an absolute last resort and only applicable when all feasible options to improve vaccination uptake have been exhausted," WHO Europe director Hans Kluge told reporters.</p> <p>"The effectiveness of mandates is very context specific," Kluge said, adding that public confidence and trust in authorities needed to be considered.</p> <p>"What is acceptable in one society and community may not be effective and acceptable in another."</p> <p>Indonesia, Micronesia and Turkmenistan have also made vaccinations against the coronavirus mandatory for all adults.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/06 Revised US 'Remain in Mexico' policy
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SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/immigration-joe-biden-mexico-texas-missouri-1eb0b6dd1d0676e33702aec7f07e75ac
GIST	<p>SAN DIEGO (AP) — The Biden administration on Monday reinstated a Trump-era policy to make asylum-seekers wait in Mexico for hearings in U.S. immigration court, seeking to comply with a court order and agreeing to changes and additions demanded by Mexico.</p> <p>It began in El Paso, Texas, with up to 50 migrants to be returned daily to Ciudad Juarez, according to a U.S. official who spoke on condition of anonymity because details were not made public.</p> <p>The Homeland Security Department confirmed that returns began at one location and will be expanded to six others. It declined to identify the launch city or how many migrants will be processed, citing “operational security reasons.”</p> <p>Revival of the “Remain in Mexico” policy comes even as the Biden administration maneuvers to end it in a way that survives legal scrutiny. President Joe Biden scrapped the policy, but a lawsuit by Texas and Missouri has forced him to put it back into effect, subject to Mexico’s acceptance.</p> <p>WHAT IS THE ‘REMAIN IN MEXICO’ POLICY?</p> <p>About 70,000 asylum-seekers have been forced to wait in Mexico for U.S. hearings under the policy that President Donald Trump introduced in January 2019 and which Biden suspended on his first day in office. Illegal border crossings fell sharply after Mexico, facing Trump’s threat of higher tariffs, acquiesced in 2019 to the policy’s rapid expansion. Asylum-seekers were victims of major violence while waiting in Mexico and faced a slew of legal obstacles, such as access to attorneys and case information.</p> <p>Only 1% of asylum-seekers subject to the policy were granted relief, according to Syracuse University’s Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse. About six of 10 claims were denied or dismissed, and the rest are pending.</p> <p>Only about one of every 10 had legal representation, well below the average in U.S. immigration court.</p> <p>Trump administration officials insist the policy was critical to deter illegal crossings. Alejandro Mayorkas, Biden’s homeland security secretary, said the policy, likely contributed to a drop in crossings in 2019 but with “substantial and unjustifiable human costs” to asylum-seekers who were exposed to violence while waiting in Mexico. Critics say the policy, officially called “Migrant Protection Protocols,” ignores U.S. law and international obligations for asylum, which Trump called “a sham.”</p> <p>HOW IS ‘REMAIN IN MEXICO’ 2.0 DIFFERENT?</p> <p>Biden’s version expands the policy to migrants from Western Hemisphere countries, while Trump largely limited it to the hemisphere’s Spanish-speaking countries. Mexicans continue to be exempt.</p> <p>The expansion is especially significant for Haitians, who formed a massive camp in the Texas border town of Del Rio in September. Brazilians, who were largely spared under Trump, may also be heavily affected. The U.S. will try to complete cases within 180 days, a response to Mexico’s concerns that they will languish in a court system that is backlogged with 1.5 million cases.</p> <p>U.S. authorities will ask migrants if they fear being returned to Mexico instead of relying on them to raise concerns unprompted. If migrants express fear, they will be screened and have 24 hours to find an attorney or representative.</p> <p>Migrants will also have an opportunity to meet with attorneys before each hearing, U.S. officials say. The State Department is working with Mexico on locations for video and phone access to attorneys in the U.S. Many U.S.-based legal aid groups that have represented asylum-seekers waiting in Mexico say they will no longer take such cases. Advocates are highly skeptical of claims by U.S. and Mexican officials that other lawyers will likely come forward.</p> <p>WHAT DOES MEXICO SAY?</p>

	<p>U.S. District Judge Matthew Kacsmaryk, a Trump appointee in Amarillo, Texas, wrote in his Aug. 13 ruling that reinstating the policy was subject to Mexico’s acceptance. Mexico’s foreign relations secretary said Thursday that it would allow returns “for humanitarian reasons” after changes and additions that the Biden administration promised.</p> <p>All migrants subject to the policy will be vaccinated against COVID-19. Adults will get the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, which requires only one shot. Children who are eligible under U.S. guidelines will get the Pfizer shot, with second shots when they come to the U.S. for their first hearings.</p> <p>During negotiations, Mexican officials expressed concern about returning migrants to Tamaulipas state, an especially dangerous area across the border from South Texas, the busiest corridor for illegal crossings. They sought U.S. financial support for more shelter space but got only vague commitments.</p> <p>The policy will eventually be expanded to six other locations besides El Paso: San Diego and Calexico in California; Nogales, Arizona; and the Texas border cities of Brownsville, Eagle Pass and Laredo.</p> <p>Arrangements to provide transportation to and from the border within Mexico are being worked on. Migrants returned to Tamaulipas from Brownsville, Eagle Pass and Laredo may be moved deeper into Mexico for personal safety.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/06 Seattle-area traffic congestion increasing
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/transportation/seattle-area-traffic-increasing-but-still-below-pre-pandemic-levels/
GIST	<p>It’s not just your imagination – traffic congestion is slowly returning to Seattle-area roads. But while we’re no longer in the quietest days of the pandemic, delays on the region’s highways, byways and arterials are still well below those of 2019, according to a new report from Kirkland-based Inrix, which collects and analyzes traffic data.</p> <p>When compared to driving on empty roads, the average driver in the Seattle region lost 30 hours to traffic congestion in 2021. That’s up from 25 hours the year before, but still far below the 74 hours estimated in 2019.</p> <p>Trips to downtown Seattle remain depressed at 36% fewer than in 2019, a sign of the protracted pandemic and on-again, off-again plans from large employers to bring their workers back to the office.</p> <p>“There was talk about Carmageddon last year, about people avoiding transit and hopping in their car and just driving a bunch of miles,” said Bob Pishue, an analyst for Inrix. “What this shows is that that didn’t happen and it’s probably not likely to happen.... It’s more of a gradual return for the country.”</p> <p>Although increased since last year, Seattle’s traffic congestion is still 60% below 2019 levels, which is a slower return than many U.S. cities. Where it was the country’s 15th slowest region in 2020, it’s now the 21st. Southern cities like Miami and New Orleans are creeping back toward their previous levels of traffic at just 20% down from pre-COVID levels. Las Vegas, meanwhile, was actually more congested in 2021 than it was in 2019.</p> <p>Pishue suggested that the presence of tech giants like Microsoft and Amazon means the Seattle region may not be under the same pressure to return to the roads. Just as those companies were among the first to shutter their offices in 2020, their employees are now well-accustomed to remote work today.</p> <p>“There are multiple things going into this this year, but what we have noticed is that in those [locations] that have the ability or a culture of telecommuting, we have seen a significant reduction in congestion,” said Pishue.</p>

The worst corridors in the region are unlikely to surprise most commuters. The stretch going south into Tacoma on Interstate 5 – beginning around the Wild Waves water park – was considered to be the country’s 12th most congested. Going north on I-5 from Northgate toward Everett was the country’s 19th slowest stretch.

The slowest corridor in the country was also on I-5, but thousands of miles to the south in Los Angeles, the city that invented traffic.

Pishue noted that not all corridors are seeing an equal return of traffic. Routes that run north and south have started slowing more noticeably, while east and west commutes are still relatively open – perhaps because of the Eastside’s heavy tech industry.

Inrix collects GPS pings of drivers and tracks how long it takes them to move from one point to another. In aggregate, the data paints a picture of traffic patterns.

Although based locally, the report looks globally. With some exceptions, the data paints a similar picture for international cities, most of which have seen some return of traffic, but not to 2019 levels. London, the report concluded, sapped the greatest number of hours from drivers of any city in the world. Paris, Brussels, Moscow and New York rounded out the top 5.

It’s a similar story when it comes to public transportation, most of which has seen a slight rebound from the depths of the pandemic, but still lags below what’s considered normal. Sound Transit’s various modes tallied more than 4 million total rides in February 2020; in April 2020, that was close to 500,000. By September of this year, ridership had [bumped back to nearly 2 million riders](#).

Spokesperson for Sound Transit, John Gallagher, said October’s light-rail ridership was 75% of 2019’s, helped in part by the opening of three new stops in North Seattle. The future, however, is unclear. “While we certainly hope ridership continues to grow, the pandemic has schooled all of us in uncertainty,” he said. King County Metro ridership has [also begun to climb](#), but is still below 2019 levels.

With the omicron variant lurking, the same uncertainty applies to the entire region’s transportation patterns. For example, demand for office space in Seattle dropped 31% between September and October, [according to commercial leasing platform VTS](#) – the steepest decline of the cities surveyed. Amazon announced in October it [was indefinitely delaying](#) its date for bringing workers back into the office.

Statewide, highways are starting to look more normal. According to [sample data](#) from the Washington State Department of Transportation collected across 32 locations in the state, traffic has nearly returned to 2019’s level.

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HEADLINE	12/06 Utensils w/takeout? Next year: must ask
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/want-utensils-with-your-takeout-order-next-year-in-washington-youll-have-to-ask-for-them/
GIST	<p>Starting next year, Washington businesses can no longer automatically include single-use food service items like straws and utensils with food orders.</p> <p>While customers can request individual items or pick them up at self-serve stations, the move is a part of a new state law meant to reduce single-use plastics waste. The new rule is a part of a set of laws signed by Gov. Jay Inslee in May, aimed to reduce single-use plastics and increase recycled content.</p> <p>“This law nudges people to help reduce unnecessary waste,” Washington Department of Ecology solid waste program manager Laurie Davies said in a statement.</p> <p>Items include:</p>

- Forks, spoons, knives, chopsticks and other utensils
- Cocktail picks, straws and coffee splash sticks and stirrers
- Condiment packets or sauce cups
- Cold cup lids (except for those given at drive-through windows or large events)

According to the Washington state Department of Ecology, single-use food service wares are a major contaminant in the state's recycling systems. Earlier this year, the state also enacted [a single-use plastic bag ban](#).

The city of Seattle also requires food businesses — including food trucks, coffee shops, grocery stores and restaurants — to hand out recyclable or compostable utensils, containers, cups and other disposable food service items.

The new law does not apply to food service products provided to residents, patients or customers in [Washington health care facilities](#), including state hospitals, long-term care facilities, hospice, senior nutrition programs and nursing homes, Meals on Wheels, and services to individuals with developmental disabilities.

Under the new requirements, multiple utensils cannot be bundled or packaged together so that a customer is unable to take just the desired utensil.

Repeat noncompliance by businesses may result in fines, according to the Department of Ecology. Fines can be no less than \$150 for each day in violation, with a cap at \$2,000 per day, [according to the bill text](#). Those wishing to submit reports of noncompliance can fill out a complaint form by visiting [ecology.wa.gov](#).

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HEADLINE	12/06 US warns Russia: troops to eastern Europe
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/06/us-says-it-will-send-troops-to-eastern-europe-if-russia-invades-ukraine
GIST	<p>The US has said it would send reinforcements to Nato's eastern flank in response to a Russian invasion of Ukraine, as well as imposing severe new economic measures, in a warning to Moscow on the eve of talks between Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin.</p> <p>Biden will also make clear to Putin on Tuesday that the US will not rule out future Ukrainian membership of Nato, as the Russian leader has demanded, a senior US official said.</p> <p>On Monday, Biden spoke to European leaders in preparation for the Putin summit. Afterwards, Boris Johnson said that they had agreed to present a "united front" on Ukraine.</p> <p>US secretary of state Antony Blinken on Monday spoke to Ukraine president Volodymyr Zelenskiy, and reiterated Washington's "unwavering support" in the face of "Russian aggression," the US state department said.</p> <p>Zelenskiy said in a tweet that he and Blinken agreed to continue "joint and concerted action."</p> <p>With an estimated 100,000 Russian troops already gathered within striking distance of the borders, the crisis is at its worst since 2015, when Moscow staged a large-scale incursion into Ukraine, clandestinely sending tanks and artillery to encircle Ukrainian troops and compelling Kyiv to sign a peace agreement in Minsk that has since come close to collapse.</p> <p>The official pointed out in a briefing to reporters that the first Russian military intervention in Ukraine led to more US troops and equipment being deployed in eastern Europe, and that there would be a similar response this time.</p>

“It would certainly be the case that if Putin moved in, there would be an increasing request from eastern flank allies, and a positive response from the United States, for additional forces and capabilities and exercises to take place there to ensure the safety and security of our eastern flank allies in the face of that kind of aggression in Ukraine,” the official said, but made clear that Biden would not be threatening a direct US military response.

“The United States is not seeking to end up in a circumstance in which the focus on our countermeasures is the direct use of American military force, as opposed to a combination of support for the Ukrainian military, strong economic countermeasures, and a substantial increase in support and capability to our Nato allies to ensure that they remain safe,” the senior official said, adding he would not disclose “what the president is going to say on the question of under what circumstances the US military could get involved”.

The official said “substantial economic countermeasures” from the US and Europe could “impose significant and severe economic harm on the Russian economy”.

Putin has said that he will seek “security guarantees” for Russia, including a ban on Nato enlargement or military support for Ukraine. The White House made clear that would not be up for discussion.

“The US has consistently expressed support for the principle that every country has the sovereign right to make its own decisions with respect to its security,” the US official said. “That remains US policy today and will remain US policy in the future. So that much is straightforward and clear.”

Russia has virtually frozen direct contacts with the Ukraine government and Zelenskiy, whom it has accused of preparing his own attack against regions of south-east Ukraine controlled by Russian-backed forces. Ukraine has strongly denied the claims.

The Ukraine defence minister, Oleksii Reznikov, on Friday told its parliament that Russia had an estimated 94,000 troops near the Ukrainian border and may be preparing an offensive beginning in late January. US officials have given similar estimates of Russian troop numbers and potential timeline for an attack as Putin upped his rhetoric about the west crossing Russia’s “red lines” in terms of providing military support to the Kyiv government.

Both western and Russian analysts have said that Moscow is making a credible threat of launching a large-scale military offensive, although there are differing estimates to how likely a Russian offensive is and what may trigger it.

“This is the largest Russian military deployment completely out of cycle that we’ve probably seen period, certainly since 2014,” said Michael Kofman, the research programme director in the Russia studies programme at the CNA security thinktank.

Kofman said the size of the buildup – the second this year – unusual troop movements and efforts to prepare reservists were far more elaborate than required to send a credible threat to Ukraine and its western allies. “You could intimidate or scare people with a much smaller force, much more visibly deployed,” he said.

The Russian government has accused Washington of creating war hysteria, but Putin has publicly directed government officials to maintain high levels of tension with the west to make sure that its interests are not ignored.

Ukrainians have strongly opposed having their fate dictated by the Russian government and officials have called for more military and economic support from the west.

Fyodor Lukyanov, a prominent Russian foreign policy analyst, said he did not believe Russia was imminently preparing to launch an offensive. But Moscow had shown that it was ready to use force if it could not negotiate a change to the post-cold war security arrangement in Europe, he said.

“There is a real red line,” he said. “Right or wrong. But Russia perceives any kind of military alignment between Ukraine and the west, not necessarily Nato membership ... That is seen here as absolutely unacceptable.”

He said Putin had shown a personal interest in the conflict’s outcome. “He’s not under time pressure because I don’t see any signs that he is going to leave soon,” said Lukyanov. “But he sees his duty as president not to leave this problem for the next leadership.”

There are modest expectations for what Biden and Putin can achieve in Tuesday’s video call, and much will depend on whether Russia at least halts its military buildup after the negotiations.

“I’d love them to walk out of this and see Russian forces start to pull back, but I think the Russian forces are going to stay where they are until there’s more of a deal because they are Russia’s leverage,” said Olga Oliker, Crisis Group’s programme director for Europe and central Asia. The considerable Russian forces arrayed on Ukraine’s border were, she said, “reminding you that the unthinkable is there”.

The decision of whether or not to engage with the Kremlin in negotiations has elicited strong opinions in Washington and in European capitals, where policy is often presented as either one of strict deterrence or appeasement.

Lukyanov said that just an agreement to hold further talks on European security could be viewed as a success in Moscow. But after threats of an invasion for the second time since April, pressure is also growing on the Kremlin to walk away with a concrete win or risk seeing its threats disregarded in the future.

“Just to de-escalate for nothing now would be a loss,” said Kofman.

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HEADLINE	12/06 Saudi crown prince tours Gulf region
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-crown-prince-tours-gulf-as-iran-nuclear-talks-stall-11638801218?mod=lead_feature_below_a_pos1
GIST	<p>DUBAI—Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman embarked on a rare tour of the Persian Gulf region in a bid to shore up his position with neighboring allies and build consensus on the threat posed by rival Iran as world powers hold talks to revive the 2015 nuclear deal.</p> <p>As he arrived in Oman on Monday for talks with the country’s ruler, Saudi air defenses intercepted ballistic missiles above Riyadh and a southern border city. The Defense Ministry blamed Iran-aligned Houthi rebels in Yemen and said shrapnel had fallen on some residential districts in the capital without causing damage.</p> <p>Prince Mohammed’s five-day trip includes stops in the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar for the first time since Riyadh and its regional allies resolved a dispute with Doha earlier this year.</p> <p>The visits come after talks in Vienna to salvage the nuclear deal between Iran, the U.S. and other world powers stalled last week. The Gulf states aren’t eager for military confrontation with Tehran, but worry that even if world powers agree a deal, Iran’s support for armed groups across the region and its deployment of drones and ballistic missiles will continue to endanger their security.</p> <p>“Among the topics that will be discussed is how to effectively address the ongoing Iranian threat,” a senior Saudi official said.</p> <p>Yemen and other topics such as investments, food security and trade will also be discussed ahead of a summit of the Gulf Cooperation Council, which includes the six Gulf countries, later this month in Riyadh,</p>

according to Gulf officials. The Saudi Royal Court said that Prince Mohammed would discuss with neighboring leaders bilateral relations and issues of common interest; it didn't specifically mention Iran.

Saudi Arabia is struggling to exit from the war in Yemen, where it leads an Arab military coalition that intervened in 2015 to prop up the internationally-recognized government after the Houthis seized the capital. It is seeking to ensure support from Gulf allies as the Houthis gain new ground including around the strategic oil-rich city of Marib near the Saudi border.

Following Monday's missile attack on Riyadh, the Saudi-led coalition pledged to "strike with an iron fist" and announced an extensive operation "in response to the threat."

Asked about the attack, the Houthis' deputy minister of information Nasr al-Din Amir said the group had the right to respond to coalition airstrikes in Sana'a, Taiz and other Yemeni provinces that he said had killed and wounded dozens of people in the past two days.

The U.S. has encouraged its Gulf partners to project a united front on key issues like Iran, which has gained new urgency amid concern in the region that Washington is disengaging to focus on China. But the Arab monarchies have struggled to come together in the face of divergent national interests. While Iran and Saudi Arabia are rivals, Tehran has deep business ties with the U.A.E. and shares the world's biggest gas field with Qatar. Less powerful Kuwait and Oman have long tried to stay out of conflicts, which has also allowed them to often help mediate regional disputes.

Separately, the U.A.E.'s national security adviser, Sheikh Tahnoun bin Zayed al Nahyan, met Monday in Tehran with President Ebrahim Raisi, becoming the most senior Emirati official to publicly visit the Islamic Republic in eight years. That follows last week's meeting in Ankara between Abu Dhabi's crown prince and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, as the U.A.E. looks to de-escalate tensions with regional rivals.

Sheikh Tahnoun invited Mr. Raisi to visit Abu Dhabi to mark a new chapter in the countries' relations, Iranian state television reported. The state-run Emirates News Agency said they had exchanged views on issues of common interest.

The Tehran trip "is a serious attempt to engage Iran and reach out to the new administration in Tehran," said Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, a prominent Emirati political scientist. "But it is not going to change the fact that Iran remains the constant threat to Gulf security."

Prince Mohammed's Gulf tour marks the first significant foreign travel for the Saudi leader since the Covid-19 pandemic began. Besides a brief trip to Egypt, he has largely been holed up at a palace on the site of a futuristic city in northwest Saudi Arabia or on his yacht nearby in the Red Sea.

He also hasn't visited the U.S. or Europe since 2018, when the killing of dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi by government operatives led some Western governments to shun him. A visit Saturday by French President Emmanuel Macron was the first trip to the kingdom by a major Western leader since the killing, which the prince has denied ordering. On Sunday, at the start of his high-profile week, Prince Mohammed attended a Formula One race in the coastal city of Jeddah, where stars, including Justin Bieber, performed.

A Gulf official with knowledge of Prince Mohammed's tour called it "making a statement" about Saudi Arabia's regional leadership. Crafting a unified stance toward Iran would be on the table, the official noted.

Just ahead of Prince Mohammed's visit to Qatar on Wednesday, Mr. Erdogan will also visit the country to discuss Turkey's relationship with the Gulf, according to Qatari officials. "Both Erdogan and MBS have expressed to the Qatari emir that they want to have stronger ties and restore trade," a senior Qatari adviser said.

HEADLINE	12/06 Auditor: ESD lacks employee fraud control
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3269446/state-auditors-office-esd-report/
GIST	<p>A new report from the State Auditor's Office finds that a lack of controls at the Employment Security Department (ESD) allowed a former employee to misappropriate at least \$315,282.</p> <p>Reyes de la Cruz III of Moses Lake was arrested in September and charged with funneling hundreds of thousands of dollars to friends and family who didn't qualify for unemployment benefits, as well as to himself. Investigators say some of that money was given in exchange for bribes.</p> <p>If convicted, he could face decades behind bars.</p> <p>The auditor's new report alleges that de la Cruz was able to get away with the crime because, quite simply, no one was checking his work.</p> <p>"We found the Department did not properly monitor and review claims to ensure benefit payments were legitimate and to avoid a loss of public funds," the report states.</p> <p>Even when the employee used the same address for multiple claims, used a fake social security card as one person's ID, and processed claims for people in jail, there was no review process to catch these red flags, said Auditor Pat McCarthy.</p> <p>"This is a wake-up call for every public agency, quite frankly, to set up strong internal checks and balances to minimize fraud risk, ... whether you're at the local level or at the state level, tighten up your internal controls, be fastidious, be vigilant," McCarthy told KIRO Radio.</p> <p>McCarthy said this is the only case of potential employee misappropriation at ESD that her office is investigating.</p> <p>"ESD distributed more than \$13.6 billion in unemployment benefits in 2020, so some may argue, 'Well, it's \$315,000. In the grand scheme of things, it's not a lot.' Well, it's a lot to most people, it is a lot to us," McCarthy said.</p> <p>She does sympathize with ESD, noting that the department was overwhelmed by a record number of unemployment claims at the time the fraud happened.</p> <p>"They were dealing with a tsunami of requests. They were hiring people right and left to deal with those requests," McCarthy said. "But it doesn't mean that you can't look for those red flags."</p> <p>McCarthy's office put a series of recommendations into the report, such as a stronger ID verification system, fraud prevention improvements that can flag suspicious claims more quickly, and "adding a second set of eyes on certain benefit decisions and account changes," McCarthy said.</p> <p>She noted that ESD has been making these types of improvements since last year's fraud, in which the Auditor's Office says at least \$650 million was stolen from ESD by fraudsters.</p> <p>In its response to the report, ESD stated that it will put in more rigorous training and review processes, but noted that it would slow things down too much to have a second person review each claim.</p> <p>"A complete review of all claims would not be manageable and would essentially require that claims be worked twice, which would negatively impact our ability to pay legitimate claimants in a timely manner," the ESD said.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/06 Delta 'biggest concern' despite omicron
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SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3268962/delta-variant-remains-washingtons-biggest-concern-despite-arrival-of-omicron/
GIST	<p>With the omicron variant having officially been identified in Washington, the focus of state health officials remains on a more dominant strain still comprising the vast majority of COVID-19 cases.</p> <p>The omicron cases in Washington were found in three people, one in each of Thurston, Pierce, and King counties, based on samples collected between Nov. 29 and Dec. 1. Little is known about the variant at this point, with a level of uncertainty surrounding whether it is more transmissible, or causes more severe forms of illness.</p> <p>As state Secretary of Health Dr. Umair Shah noted in a weekend briefing, there are also larger concerns for the moment.</p> <p>“The likelihood is that we are going to see more confirmations [of the omicron variant], but we have to also balance that with remembering our biggest concern right now is delta,” Shah noted.</p> <p>The highly infectious delta variant has continued to comprise nearly all of the state’s COVID-19 cases, having been the driving factor behind a fall surge dating back to early September. Case rates in Washington have gradually dipped since then, but are still hovering around a level similar to what the state saw at the peak of its spring 2021 surge.</p> <p>Other health leaders have urged residents to look at the larger context surrounding the omicron variant, pointing to how “we know much more about COVID-19” now than we did during early surges, and “we’re better prepared for it.”</p> <p>“Even with a highly mutated virus like omicron, we are not going back to square one of the pandemic,” King County Health Officer Dr. Jeff Duchin said in a news release. “We know layered protections work together to maximally reduce risk, and that will continue to be the case for delta and for omicron if that becomes a dominant strain circulating in our community.”</p> <p>Moving forward, Duchin — as well as Dr. Shah — have maintained that the best defense against either the delta or omicron variants continues to be getting vaccinated and/or boosted.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/06 India: virus abates, hunger crisis persists
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/12/06/india-hunger-coronavirus/
GIST	<p>MUMBAI — One evening in October, Meena Sonawane, a domestic worker living in a slum in the Mumbai suburb of Chembur, cooked dinner with the only food in her kitchen: rice. She mixed red chili powder into the rice, then carefully divided it into three portions for her children, keeping two spoonfuls for herself.</p> <p>A day before, the last money she had left was spent at the hospital where her husband had died after a brief illness. In the commotion, she missed her daily pickup of the free meals handed out by a local nonprofit.</p> <p>“I felt gutted to feed them just rice and chili,” 34-year-old Sonawane said. “But there was no choice.”</p> <p>For more than 600 days — since India’s first coronavirus lockdown in early 2020 — the Sonawane family has depended on food aid. Even as the number of coronavirus cases has diminished, another crisis has unfolded in homes across the country: With high unemployment and a record contraction in the economy following two nationwide lockdowns, families like the Sonawanes lost both their purchasing power and savings and can now scarcely afford three meals a day.</p> <p>There are no nationwide numbers on the state of food insecurity in India, but recent studies point to an alarming problem. In the 2021 Global Hunger Index released in October, India ranked 101st of the 116 countries surveyed, falling seven spots from the previous year. In a separate 2020 survey by Azim Premji</p>

University in Bangalore, 90 percent of respondents reported [a reduction in food intake due to the lockdown](#). Twenty percent of respondents continued to battle the problem even six months later.

The Indian government dismissed the Hunger Index ranking, saying that estimates used for the undernourished population were [“devoid of ground reality”](#) and that the report disregarded its “massive effort” during the pandemic. [Oxfam India, in a statement](#), said the Hunger Index “unfortunately reflects the reality of the country where hunger [has been] accentuated since the covid-19 pandemic.”

India’s Ministry of Food and Public Distribution did not respond to requests for comment.

“The hunger crisis is, in fact, fundamentally reflective of the livelihood crisis,” said Jayati Ghosh, a development economist. People do not have money to buy food, she said, and “that’s both our employment and food systems failing.”

The unemployment rate in April to June of 2020, at the height of the first lockdown, was nearly [21 percent in urban areas](#), according to government figures. Even as the economy showed signs of revival this year, [15 million jobs were lost](#) in May when a devastating second wave killed hundreds of thousands and brought the health-care system to near collapse.

Nearly [80 percent of India’s workforce](#) makes a living in the informal sector, which economists say was the worst hit. The problem is more pronounced in urban areas like Mumbai, where such workers subsist on their daily income for survival and lack networks or resources such as agricultural land in their home villages.

Sonawane’s work and life came to a sudden halt with the two lockdowns. The five jobs she worked — cleaning and cooking at upscale homes in the high-rise buildings visible from her cramped shanty — disappeared immediately.

Her husband, who worked as a delivery person for a gas company, stayed home. So did her three children, including her youngest son, 7, who would repeatedly ask her in the early days when school would reopen. Now, she said, he has forgotten much of what he learned, as primary schools in the city have remained shut since the initial closures in March 2020.

After the lockdowns were lifted, Sonawane went back to work. But the world outside had changed.

Two of the families she worked for had left the city, and another told her not to return over coronavirus concerns. Her pre-pandemic income of \$160 a month shrank by half. Her husband’s company laid him off. “We never had food shortages at home” before this, Sonawane said. “We always earned enough to feed the family.”

Right to food

India’s food security law aims to provide free or subsidized food grains to two-thirds of the country’s population, making it the largest safety net in the country. But experts say gaps, its reliance on biometric authentication and a narrow scope have hindered its efficacy.

During the lockdown, the government expanded benefits by providing an extra five kilograms (about 11 pounds) of rice or wheat every month to those eligible, a program that was recently extended to March 2022.

But economists say the law’s coverage needs to account for the increase in population over the past decade, which could bring an additional [100 million](#) people under its purview.

Not far from Chembur, where Sonawane lives, is the working-class neighborhood of Govandi, framed by the country’s largest landfill. In one of the narrow streets is the home of 31-year-old Farhan Ahmad, a father of two, who worked as a driver and is one of the millions of migrants who have fallen through the cracks in the food law.

The five years before the pandemic had been good for Ahmad, who had moved to Mumbai from his village hoping to make a life in the city.

Ahmad signed up to drive with Ola, an Indian multinational ride-hailing company, when a friend lent him a car if he agreed to pay back the loan on it. By the time the coronavirus arrived, he had a small sum set aside in savings. He and his wife debated buying a refrigerator.

“Forget about affording a fridge now,” said Ahmad. “On most days I can’t buy enough food.”

On a recent evening, Ahmad’s wife, Shama, rocked their 15-month-old daughter as she cried. It was yet another day when they had not been able to buy milk for the baby. In his wallet, Ahmad had less than half a dollar. His bank account was empty, and a mountain of debt had steadily grown.

The car was gone because he was unable to repay the loan. Now, he said, he was ready to work any job. “But no jobs are available. There are too many people like me,” he said.

For the first few months of the lockdown, Ahmad’s family ate meals supplied by a local activist, then subsisted on ration kits supplied by another group, which stopped in July.

Since then, Ahmad has relied on his relatives for help with food and money. The family’s diet no longer includes fruit, eggs or meat — items that were once a staple. Twice a week, they buy vegetables. On other days, they eat rice or flatbread with garlic chutney.

And yet India’s food grain stocks are currently nearly three times more than the normal reserve, a paradox that Ghosh, the economist, said was impossible to explain.

She said the government must immediately provide rations to everyone in need, expand the commodities given out, and increase spending on programs guaranteeing employment and pensions.

“None of this is an act of God that one cannot do something about,” she said.

The road ahead

The long-term implications of food insecurity are grave. Varna Sri Raman, a researcher at Oxfam India, said the government’s own data from 2019-20 shows malnutrition among children rose, reversing gains from five years ago.

“Not investing in food security is like underinvesting in your people and your future workforce,” she said. “In terms of policy, it’s very shortsighted.”

As critics slammed the government for not stepping up, citizen-led initiatives moved to fill the gap. In Mumbai, the [Want Food collective](#) began as a short-term arrangement to help stranded migrant workers when the first lockdown was announced suddenly. But the demands swelled and the collective began to provide meals to vulnerable communities across the city — 6.6 million at last count.

The collective has funded two women-led community kitchens in the city that are still operating.

Sujata Sawant, a local activist who helped set up one of the kitchens in a suburban slum in Kurla, said the community’s need has been always more than the help that poured in.

“The desperation for food in the lockdowns was something I’ve never seen,” said Sawant, 43. In April, when they began to cook and distribute meals themselves, “the lines were as long as the eye could see,” Sawant recounted in her tiny office across from a defunct railway line that cuts through the slum.

The number of people relying on meals from the kitchen has fallen drastically, but they still cater nearly 800 packets every day, an indication of how hunger continues to stalk those on the margins.

	<p>Sawant said she foresees another six months before things improve — if another wave of the virus doesn't hit.</p> <p>On a recent afternoon, as Sonawane, the domestic worker, returned home from work, she picked up two food packets sent by Sawant's team.</p> <p>At home, her three children sat on the stone floor for lunch.</p> <p>She had cooked a local variety of cheap beans that they would eat with stale flatbread from the previous day. There was also some leftover rice and eggplant that her employer had shared. The fridge was empty, aside from a present of a box of sweets from a festival and a lump of butter.</p> <p>"When the children ask for more food, I have no answer," she said. "I don't know how we will keep going like this."</p> <p>Sonawane carefully saved the day's food packets from the nonprofit — rice and lentils cooked together — for the next meal.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/06 CDC: 'very high' risk France, Portugal
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/travel/2021/12/06/cdc-level-4-france-portugal/
GIST	<p>Federal health authorities issued a warning Monday against travel to several European countries as well as Jordan and Tanzania amid growing fears of the omicron variant, telling people to make sure they are fully vaccinated if they must visit.</p> <p>The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said to avoid travel to France, Portugal, Cyprus, Andorra and Liechtenstein, grouping all in a Level 4 category that represents a "very high" level of the coronavirus. Countries and territories in this group have an infection incidence rate of more than 500 new cases per 100,000 people over the past 28 days (or, in places with fewer than 100,000 residents, more than 500 cases cumulatively over the past 28 days).</p> <p>"Because of the current situation in France, even fully vaccinated travelers may be at risk for getting and spreading COVID-19 variants," one advisory reads.</p> <p>Last week, the CDC urged against travel to Niger, Papua New Guinea, Poland, and Trinidad and Tobago.</p> <p>The CDC also recently told airlines to share contact information for people entering the United States who have been in southern Africa, where the omicron variant was initially identified. Previously, the CDC had ordered airlines and aircraft operators to collect contact details on passengers and asked that they share it with federal health authorities "upon request," to aid public health follow-up.</p> <p>Worries that omicron could prove more transmissible and more resistant to vaccinations have triggered a cascade of travel restrictions around the world. But many experts question the value of travel bans, and the World Health Organization has urged against them.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/06 Oil, gas drilling permits not slowing down
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/12/06/biden-is-approving-more-oil-gas-drilling-permits-public-lands-than-trump-analysis-finds/
GIST	The Biden administration has approved more oil and gas drilling permits on public lands per month than the Trump administration did during the first three years of Donald Trump's presidency, according to an analysis shared exclusively with The Climate 202.

The [report](#) by **Public Citizen**, a liberal advocacy group, illustrates that **President Biden** has been slow to reverse Trump's fossil-fuel-friendly agenda, despite his [campaign promise](#) to push for "no more drilling on federal lands" because of climate change.

The analysis looked at data from the **Bureau of Land Management**, which processes applications for drilling permits on public lands. Its main findings were:

- During Biden's first year in office so far, BLM has approved an average of 333 drilling permits per month. That figure is more than 35% higher than Trump's first year in office, when BLM approved an average of 245 drilling permits per month.
- That number is also higher than the monthly average in 2018 (279 permits) and 2019 (284 permits), but lower than the monthly average in 2020 (452 permits), when oil companies [stockpiled permits](#) in the final months of the Trump administration.
- Under Biden, monthly permit approvals peaked at 652 in April but have started to trend downward in the second half of 2021.
- *(When analyzing Biden's first year in office, the group excluded January 2021, when Trump was in office for most of the month. Similarly, when analyzing Trump's first year in office, it excluded January 2017, when **Barack Obama** was president for most of the month.)*

"From an environmentalist's point of view, this doesn't look great for Biden," Alan Zibel, the lead author of the analysis and the research director of Public Citizen's Corporate Presidency Project, told The Climate 202.

Jamie Henn, an organizer with the [Build Back Fossil Free](#) coalition who was not involved in the analysis, said the findings underscore his frustrations with the Biden administration.

"The president has basically only tried to tackle one side of the climate problem," Henn told The Climate 202. "He's talked a lot about building clean energy, but he hasn't done anything to stop fossil fuels. And you need to tackle both sides if we're going to address this crisis."

Court challenges

Still, Zibel said the findings are "understandable" within a broader legal context, noting that the courts have constrained Biden's ability to curtail oil and gas development on public lands.

- During his first week in office, Biden issued an [executive order](#) instructing the **Interior Department** to pause all new lease sales on public lands and waters while it reviewed how to adjust the program.
- But Western oil drillers and 14 Republican-led states sued over the order. And in June, a Trump-appointed federal judge in Louisiana issued a preliminary injunction to block the leasing pause.
- The Biden administration is [appealing that court decision](#). In the meantime, Interior has [offered leases to oil and gas companies](#) on more than 80 million acres in the Gulf of Mexico. The administration also plans to hold onshore lease sales in February.

Interior spokeswoman **Melissa Schwartz** declined to comment on the Public Citizen analysis, although she previously said in a statement that the department is "complying with a U.S. District Court's decision."

Interior spokesman **Tyler Cherry** added in an emailed statement to The Climate 202: "Permit reviews on legally maintained leases are required by law. At the same time, Interior is conducting a more [comprehensive analysis](#) of greenhouse gas impacts from potential oil and gas lease sales than ever before."

From a White House spokesperson: "President Biden kept his campaign promise and ordered a pause on oil and gas leasing on public lands, which the courts have subsequently blocked, mandating that the program continue. Interior's Oil and Gas report reflects the current state of that program and it confirms what we have always known: that this program delivers a bad deal for American taxpayers and that it needs to be reformed. That's why, just as President Biden promised he would do on the campaign trail, both the Department of the Interior and the Congress are advancing measures to modernize the program,

minimize environmental impacts, including on the climate, and ensure that we are managing these resources to secure the best value for American taxpayers.”

Republican rhetoric

The analysis also comes as Republicans have sought to blame high gas prices on Biden's restrictions on domestic oil and gas production. The GOP is seeking to weaponize the energy price crunch to bash Democrats up for reelection next year.

- “If President Biden and his Department of the Interior get their way, the prices will go up even higher. Inflation is here to stay under the Democrats,” **Sen. John Barrasso** (Wyo.), the top Republican on the **Energy and Natural Resources Committee**, said on the Senate floor last week.
- House Minority Leader **Kevin McCarthy** (R-Calif.) [tweeted](#) last week that high gas prices are “what happens when the government is controlled by Democrats who cancel pipelines and keep American energy buried in the ground.”

Zibel, the author of the Public Citizen analysis, called such rhetoric “disingenuous.” He pointed to a recent [report](#) by **Taxpayers for Common Sense**, a nonpartisan watchdog group, which found that changes in federal leasing policy would have a negligible impact on gas prices compared to global crude oil prices and consumer demand.

“The idea that the Biden administration's public lands policies are having a meaningful impact on oil and gasoline prices,” Zibel said, “is just not a serious argument.”

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HEADLINE	12/06 India, Russia expand defense ties
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/06/world/asia/india-russia-missile-defense-deal.html
GIST	<p>NEW DELHI — India and Russia announced expanding defense ties on Monday during a visit by President Vladimir Putin to New Delhi, including the details of a \$5.4 billion missile defense system sale to India, despite a risk of sanctions from the United States.</p> <p>“Supplies have begun this month and will continue to happen,” India’s foreign secretary, Harsh Vardhan Shringla, told reporters about the missile defense system after the meeting between Mr. Putin and India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi. “It is important to note that whether it is us or Russia, we conduct an independent foreign policy.”</p> <p>The confirmation that the missile defense system deal, first agreed upon in 2018, was going ahead despite threats that it could affect India’s growing relations with the United States signaled that New Delhi was willing to take calculated risks to bolster its defenses against an emboldened China at its borders.</p> <p>India and China have failed to resolve tensions since deadly skirmishes between the two countries’ troops along their shared border last year, and their militaries remain on a war footing in the Himalayas going into a second harsh winter. India may have concluded that the United States would not penalize it for buying the defense system because the two countries have been working together closely to address the rising threat from China.</p> <p>Following Monday’s announcement, the reaction from the Biden administration wasn’t immediately clear. In 2020, the Trump administration issued sanctions against Turkey for a similar purchase, more than three years after it bought the missile defense system from Russia.</p> <p>India has deep ties to Moscow, and India’s military has for decades largely depended on Russian equipment. Even as the country has diversified its weapons imports and grown closer to the United States in trade and defense cooperation, India still relies on Russia for about half of its arms supplies.</p> <p>The two countries have also set an ambitious goal of more than tripling bilateral trade to \$30bn by 2025.</p>

“In the last few decades, several fundamentals have changed,” Mr. Modi said in welcoming Mr. Putin. “New geopolitical angles have emerged. Amidst all such variables, Indo-Russian friendship has been constant.”

The S-400 surface-to-air missile defense system is one of the world’s most sophisticated, with the ability to reach multiple targets at a maximum distance of about 250 miles. It is also a more affordable option from India’s perspective, costing [reportedly half](#) of that of the U.S. Patriot system. Indian military officials have called it “a booster dose” to the country’s military, which has [struggled to modernize](#) because of financial strains.

“S-400 deal doesn’t have only a symbolic meaning,” Russia’s foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, told the Indian news agency ANI on Monday. “It has a very important practical meaning for an Indian defense capability.”

In addition to the S-400 missile defense system, India and Russia signed a \$600 million deal to locally manufacture hundreds of thousands of Russian AK-203 rifles and an additional agreement to extend cooperation between the countries on military technology for the next decade.

The rifles, which are expected to replace the older Kalashnikov-style rifles used by Indian troops, will be manufactured in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh through a joint venture, according to [local media reports](#). Nandan Unnikrishnan, an expert on India’s relations with Russia at the New Delhi-based Observer Research Foundation, said Russia provides India an affordable and flexible partner on arms.

“India doesn’t have the kind of kitty China has with all our developmental challenges,” said Mr. Unnikrishnan. “While American or Israeli equipment is state of the art, the money it requires is three times more.”

Mr. Unnikrishnan said heavy repercussions for India were unlikely because the United States needs an India that is militarily strong to balance China’s rise in the region.

“As much as India is taking a risk I genuinely believe the U.S. will also be taking a risk if it takes the path of sanctions,” he said. “The U.S. is sophisticated enough to understand that they should not be harming their own potential allies in a bigger picture struggle they have.”

The fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban in August has worried both India and Russia on the shared threat emanating from regional terror groups. The statement released after Mr. Putin’s meeting with Mr. Modi stressed the need for an inclusive government in Afghanistan to ensure the country’s stability and prevent it from once again becoming a terror or narcotics hub.

“The leaders emphasized that Afghanistan’s territory should not be used for sheltering, training, planning or financing any terrorist groups,” the statement said.

Mr. Putin’s trip to India comes [as a buildup of Russian troops near Ukraine](#) has Western officials warning that the Kremlin could be planning a large-scale invasion. They have said that Russia could face damaging sanctions from the United States and Europe if Mr. Putin goes through with an attack.

But his visit to India — his first foreign trip since his June summit with President Biden in Geneva — also telegraphed that Russia still has plenty of friends beyond the West.

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HEADLINE	12/06 Women earn \$2M less than men as doctors
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/06/health/women-doctors-salary-pay-gap.html?action=click&module=Well&pgtype=Homepage&section=Health

Female doctors make less than their male counterparts starting from their very first days on the job, according to a large new study. Over the course of a 40-year-career, researchers estimated, this pay gap adds up to at least \$2 million.

The [survey](#) of more than 80,000 physicians, published on Monday in the medical journal Health Affairs, is the largest analysis to date on physician salaries and the first to estimate the cumulative impact of pay gaps in medicine.

“We were able to see that essentially from Year 1 to Year 40 there is a pretty sizable gap,” said Christopher Whaley, the lead author on the study and a health economist at the RAND Corporation, a nonpartisan think tank.

Dr. Whaley’s team used survey data collected between 2014 and 2019. The pay gap has probably widened since then, he said, as the pandemic has driven women [in many fields](#), including [medicine](#), out of the workplace to [take on](#) child care and other household responsibilities, lowering their cumulative career earnings.

“This is probably going to accelerate physician burnout,” Dr. Whaley said. “And so that’s just going to further exacerbate these pay issues.”

The researchers analyzed self-reported salary data submitted to Doximity, a social network similar to LinkedIn that claims to reach 80 percent of doctors in the United States. Comparing wages between men and women with the same amount of experience, the researchers estimated that, over a simulated 40-year career, male physicians earned an average of \$8.3 million while women made roughly \$6.3 million — a nearly 25 percent difference.

In their calculations, the researchers controlled for an array of factors that highly influence pay, like a doctor’s specialty, type of practice and patient volume.

More men, for example, become surgeons — the highest paid of all physician specialties — whereas more women go into primary care. And women have been shown to [spend more time](#) with their patients, leading to a lower volume of services and procedures that can be billed for.

Some of these measures are “themselves the likely manifestations of systemic bias or discrimination,” said Dr. Reshma Jagsi, a radiation oncologist and bioethicist at the University of Michigan medical school who was not involved with the new report. For example, studies have shown [widespread bias](#) against women applying for jobs in medicine that are traditionally or predominantly held by men. And women in academic medicine are less likely to get [big research grants](#) or hold [leadership positions](#).

If the researchers had not controlled for these variables, the estimated pay gap would have been far larger, they said. “Our numbers would roughly double,” Dr. Whaley said.

Even within specialties, the calculated wage gaps were sizable: highest among surgeons, at around \$2.5 million, and lowest among primary care physicians, at nearly \$920,000.

Although the gaps across all industries have [narrowed](#) over the past few decades, [almost all professions still pay women less](#). And the gap is wider among health care practitioners than among people in [computer and engineering jobs](#), for example.

The new study didn’t include data on people who identify as nonbinary or transgender, and did not specify the race of the survey respondents, which prior research has shown is also a [big factor influencing physician pay](#).

Salary information by race “is not systematically recorded really anywhere,” Dr. Whaley said. “And I think that is an important data limitation.”

	<p>The salary gaps began at the beginning of a doctor’s career and continued to widen until around Year 10 without recovering, the study found. The gap remained stable for the rest of their careers, with women never catching up to men.</p> <p>This finding is “distressing, yet unsurprising,” said Dr. Snigdha Jain, a pulmonary and critical care physician at the Yale School of Medicine who was not involved in the study. “Women physicians, who are in the prime of their reproductive years when they start practice, experience insufficient maternity leave, inadequate support on return to work and a disproportionate burden of child care in the subsequent years.”</p> <p>While roughly the same number of women graduate from medical school as men, women make up only 36 percent of working physicians. Because the new study did not follow individuals over time, it couldn’t capture the effects of this “leaky pipeline” on women’s cumulative earnings, Dr. Jain said.</p> <p>The findings suggest that the wage gap could be narrowed with policy changes that affect younger doctors, Dr. Whaley said. Offering more paid family leave and more flexible scheduling, he said, or making salaries more transparent, could help women earn their fair share.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/06 Study: pandemic has blood pressure rising
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/06/health/covid-blood-pressure.html?action=click&module=Well&pgtype=Homepage&section=Health
GIST	<p>Last year was a tough one. Americans grappled with a global pandemic, the loss of loved ones, lockdowns that splintered social networks, stress, unemployment and depression.</p> <p>It is probably no surprise that the nation’s blood pressure shot up.</p> <p>On Monday, scientists reported that blood pressure measurements of nearly a half-million adults showed a significant rise last year, compared with the previous year.</p> <p>These measurements describe the pressure of blood against the walls of the arteries. Over time, increased pressure can damage the heart, the brain, blood vessels, kidneys and eyes. Sexual function can also be affected.</p> <p>“These are very important data that are not surprising, but are shocking,” said Dr. Donald M. Lloyd-Jones, president of the American Heart Association, who was not involved in the study.</p> <p>“Even small changes in average blood pressure in the population,” he added, “can have a huge impact on the number of strokes, heart failure events and heart attacks that we’re likely to be seeing in the coming months.”</p> <p>The study, published as a research letter in the journal Circulation, is a stark reminder that even in the midst of a pandemic that has claimed more than 785,000 American lives and disrupted access to health care, chronic health conditions must still be managed.</p> <p>Almost half of all American adults have hypertension, or high blood pressure, a chronic condition referred to as a “silent killer” because it can have life-threatening consequences, though it produces few symptoms. Hypertension may also put people at greater risk for severe disease if they are infected with the coronavirus. (The evidence for that link is mixed, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.)</p> <p>The new study, by researchers at the Cleveland Clinic and Quest Diagnostics, examined data from hundreds of thousands of employees and family members in wellness programs that tracked blood pressure and other health indicators, like weight. The participants, from all 50 states and the District of</p>

Columbia, included people who had elevated blood pressure and normal blood pressure at the start of the study.

“We observed that people weren’t exercising as much during the pandemic, weren’t getting regular care, were drinking more and sleeping less,” said Dr. Luke Laffin, the lead author, a preventive cardiologist who is co-director of the Center for Blood Pressure Disorders at the Cleveland Clinic. “We wanted to know, was their blood pressure changing during the pandemic?”

The researchers found that blood pressure readings changed little from 2019 to the first three months of 2020, but increased significantly from April 2020 through December 2020, compared with the same period in 2019.

Blood pressure is measured in units of millimeters of mercury (mm Hg) and consists of two numbers. The first number refers to systolic pressure as the heart contracts, and the second number refers to diastolic pressure as the heart rests between beats. Normal blood pressure is said to be 120/80 mm Hg or less, although there is decades-long dispute about the optimal levels.

The new study found that the average monthly change from April 2020 to December 2020, compared with the previous year, was 1.10 mm Hg to 2.50 mm Hg for systolic blood pressure, and 0.14 to 0.53 for diastolic blood pressure.

The increases held true for both men and women, and in all age groups. Larger increases in both systolic and diastolic blood pressure were seen in women.

The average age of the study participants was just over 45, and slightly more than half were women. But critics said the failure to include information on the race and the ethnicity of participants was a significant weakness in the study, as hypertension is much more prevalent among Black Americans than among white or Hispanic Americans.

Black people have also been disproportionately affected by the pandemic. Dr. Laffin said information on race and ethnicity was available only for 6 percent of the study participants, so an analysis would not be meaningful.

But there is a big difference between Black Americans and white and Hispanic Americans when it comes to hypertension, said Dr. Kim Williams, a cardiologist at Rush University Medical Center in Chicago and an author of the national blood pressure guidelines that were issued in 2017.

“The hypertensive state has been epidemic in the African-American population for decades,” he said. “Our therapies have improved and our attempt at calling it out have improved, yet the gap is widening. And we know the pandemic has hit different cultures and different aspects of society in different ways.”

The causes of an overall increase in blood pressure are not clear, Dr. Laffin and his colleagues said. The reasons may include an increase in alcohol consumption, a decline in exercise, rising stress, a drop in doctors’ visits and less adherence to a medication regimen.

The researchers dismissed a possible effect of weight gain, known to raise blood pressure, saying that the men in the study had lost weight and that the women had not gained more weight than usual.

But other experts pointed out that average figures for weight gain might mask gains in segments of the population.

“It is probably multifactorial,” said Dr. Lloyd-Jones, referring to the overall rise in blood pressure. “But I think a critical piece is that we know so many people lost contact with the health care system, and lost control of blood pressure and diabetes.”

	<p>Americans must pay greater attention to overall health and the management of underlying medical conditions despite the pandemic, Dr. Laffin said, adding that the penalty for not doing so might outlast the coronavirus itself.</p> <p>“There are also public health consequences from not seeing your doctor regularly, making poor dietary choices and not exercising,” he said. “If we think about the long-term implications, that’s potentially more profound.”</p>
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HEADLINE	12/06 Myanmar’s democracy hopes move on
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/06/world/asia/myanmar-aung-san-suu-kyi.html
GIST	<p>When a court in Myanmar on Monday handed down the first sentences in the junta’s long list of charges against Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, it closed a chapter on an era of weak and compromised democracy in a Southeast Asian nation long ruled by a military fist.</p> <p>But already, a new democratic movement has emerged — younger, more progressive, more confrontational and ready to look beyond Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi for a guiding light. Hope now rests with an immensely popular shadow government that formed after Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar’s civilian leader, was detained by the military in a Feb. 1 coup.</p> <p>The challenges are immense for this new group of leaders, known as the National Unity Government, many of whom are forced to operate from exile.</p> <p>The junta is unlikely to be dislodged without unimaginable bloodshed. It and thousands of protesters, some of whom have taken up arms, are locked in a violent stalemate, prompting a top U.N. official to warn of an “alarming possibility of an escalating civil war.” No foreign nation has recognized the shadow government, although its representatives have met with senior U.S. officials, including the national security adviser, Jake Sullivan.</p> <p>What is clear, however, is that politics in Myanmar have been reshaped. The self-proclaimed government has reach throughout society. With the help of the protest movement, it operates underground schools, clinics and hospitals. When it announced last month that it would sell “bonds” to fund its revolution, it raised \$6.3 million in one day. In September, it called for a “people’s war” against the junta, prompting thousands of protesters known as the People’s Defense Forces to prepare for armed conflict.</p> <p>“The landscape has completely changed,” said Khin Ohmar, a veteran democracy activist based in Virginia who runs a human rights organization in Myanmar. “The mainstream politics, the actors, the people’s political awareness — it’s all very different.”</p> <p>Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi still has legions of devoted followers in Myanmar, who decry the military’s treatment of her. Hours after her conviction on Monday on charges of inciting public unrest and breaching Covid-19 protocols, the leader of Myanmar’s junta, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, reduced the four-year sentence meted out to her to two years. She is still facing nine other charges that could keep her locked up for the rest of her life.</p> <p>But there is a deeper recognition now that her government let down many people, including ethnic minorities and rights activists.</p> <p>Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi’s vision of democracy, both by circumstance and by choice, was constricted. Most of the ministers she appointed came from the Bamar ethnic majority. And nearly all of them belonged to her party, the National League of Democracy, or were people who supported the N.L.D. When she headed the civilian government, she named only one woman to the cabinet — herself.</p> <p>The National Unity Government has assembled a more diverse leadership, appointing members of ethnic minorities to top positions. It has ensured that about one-third of its ministers come from groups other than</p>

the Bamar majority, and from parties other than the National League of Democracy. Nine of the 37 cabinet ministers are women.

In June, the unity government said [Rohingya Muslims should be given equal rights](#), in stark contrast to Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi. She repeatedly refused to criticize the army's campaign of ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya in 2017, when thousands were killed and more than 700,000 were driven across the border to Bangladesh. In 2019, at The Hague, she [defended the army's brutal conduct](#), prompting calls for her to return the Nobel Peace Prize she was awarded in 1991.

The unity government has also proposed federalism as a way to reach out to the country's ethnic groups. It announced that, if it took power, it would repeal the 2008 Constitution, which gives the military authority to block any constitutional change that could undermine its power.

"I think a lot of the dynamics and a lot of the story has moved beyond Aung San Suu Kyi," said Richard Horsey, a senior adviser on Myanmar for the International Crisis Group. "It's not because she's no longer loved and respected. It's just that she's been silenced, and a lot of things have happened without her and have taken on a life of their own."

The National Unity Government lists Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi as one of its top leaders and has retained her title of state counselor. But it has also signaled a desire to move away from the model of concentrated power she employed as head of the civilian half of the government for five years.

The unity government says it will seek a broader consensus and take advice from a political body called the National Unity Consultative Council, which is made up of lawmakers from several political parties, ethnic armed organizations, civil society and people belonging to the broad-based protest movement.

"Our organization will not be led by a single person," Min Ko Naing, of the activist group 88 Generation Peace and Open Society, said at a news conference last month to unveil the consultative council. "It will be more like a collective leadership."

Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi has been held incommunicado in a house in Naypidaw, the capital of Myanmar. One person who has spoken with her on several occasions since her arrest said that her legal team had kept her informed on major events and the steps being taken by the shadow government, but that she was in no position to offer advice or guidance.

In private, she has expressed concern about the fate of the people and the brutality they have faced at the hands of the military. She was especially concerned that so many people had been killed and that so many young people were taking up arms.

U Moe Zaw Oo, the deputy foreign minister under the unity government, said he believed that if Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi were to be released, she would support the decisions that it was making while she was detained.

"There were times during her house arrest in the 1990s and 2000s when the N.L.D. had to make decisions in her absence," said Mr. Moe Zaw Oo, who once served as an aide to her. "Later, when she was out, she respected those decisions and understood that decisions had to be made under certain circumstances. So, this time again, I believe she will accept what the remaining N.L.D. leaders had to do."

But Thinzar Shunlei Yi, a 30-year-old rights activist in Myanmar, said the revolution did not need Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi anymore because she "has done her part."

"We want to draft a new script for our country because the time has come," she said. "Now this is the time for the younger generations and the ethnic leaders to take the leadership positions. Because the country is not just about one person. It's about everyone."

	<p>U Khin Zaw Win, director of the Tampadipa Institute, a policy advocacy organization based in Yangon, Myanmar's most populous city, said none of the measures promised by the National Unity Government would have happened under "the shadow of Aung San Suu Kyi."</p> <p>He pointed out that she did not plan for a successor or bring new blood into the National League of Democracy, which he said was run like an "exclusive" club. Instead, she surrounded herself with advisers in their 70s and 80s.</p> <p>"Every day, day by day, Aung San Suu Kyi has less and less to do with the revolution," Mr. Khin Zaw Win said. "The show can go on without her. It's better for the show to go on without her."</p>
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HEADLINE	12/06 Sudanese protest military coup
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/6/sudanese-protest-military-coup-deal-that-reinstate/
GIST	<p>CAIRO (AP) – Thousands of Sudanese took to the streets Monday in the capital of Khartoum and other cities in the latest protests against the October military coup and subsequent deal that reinstated Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok.</p> <p>Footage circulated on social media purportedly showed demonstrators marching in different locations in Khartoum and its sister city of Omdurman. There were also protests in other cities, including Kassala, Sennar and Port Sudan.</p> <p>Security forces fired tear gas to disperse protesters marching in a street near the presidential palace in Khartoum, activist Nazim Sirag said. He said they also used heavy tear gas to break up a one-day sit-in protest in Khartoum's district of Bahri. Around a dozen protesters suffered light injuries from tear gas canisters, he said.</p> <p>In past rounds of demonstrations security forces used violence, including firing live ammunition at protesters, according to activists. At least 44 protesters were killed and hundreds were wounded since the coup, according to the Sudan Doctors Committee, which tracks protester deaths.</p> <p>The Sudanese military seized power Oct. 25, dissolving the transitional government and arresting dozens of officials and politicians. The takeover upended a fragile planned transition to democratic rule more than two years after a popular uprising forced the removal of longtime autocrat Omar al-Bashir and his Islamist government.</p> <p>Hamdok was reinstated last month amid international pressure in a deal that calls for an independent technocratic Cabinet under military oversight. The agreement included the release of government officials and politicians detained since the coup and the formation of an independent technocratic Cabinet led by Hamdok.</p> <p>The deal, however, was rejected by the pro-democracy movement, which insists on handing over power to a civilian government to lead the transition. The protests came under the slogan of: "No negotiations, no compromise, no power-sharing" with the military.</p> <p>Monday's protests were called by the Sudanese Professionals Association and the so-called Resistance Committees, which spearheaded the uprising against al-Bashir and then the military coup.</p> <p>Among the protesters' demands are the restructuring of the military under civilian oversight, purging officers loyal to al-Bashir and disbanding armed groups including the Rapid Support Forces.</p> <p>"We will keep on using all peaceful means to reject and resist until the fall of the coup government and the return to the course of democratic transition," said protester Dalia Mostafa, while taking part in a march in Khartoum.</p>

The Rapid Support Forces are a paramilitary unit notorious for atrocities during the Darfur war and a 2019 massacre of protesters in Khartoum. They are led by Gen. Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo, who is also the deputy head of the ruling sovereign council.

Dagalo is seen as the co-architect of the coup along with Gen. Abdel-Fattah Burhan, head of the ruling body.

Relentless street demonstrations have put pressure on the military and Hamdok to take measures to calm angry protesters and gain their trust. Hamdok has yet to announce his Cabinet, which is likely to face opposition from the pro-democracy movement.

In televised comments over the weekend, Burhan described the deal that reinstated Hamdok as “a true start” for the democratic transition.

He said they were working on crafting a “new political charter” with the aim of establishing a broader consensus among all political forces and movements.

In the western Darfur region, meanwhile, the death toll from tribal clashes over the weekend climbed to at least 48 people, all of them shot dead, according to the Sudan Doctors Committee. It said dozens of others were wounded, some in critical condition.

The fighting grew out of a financial dispute late Saturday between two individuals in a camp for displaced persons in the Kreinik area in West Darfur province.

The clashes continued Sunday, with Arab militias known as janjaweed attacking the camp and torching and looting property, according to Adam Regal, spokesman for the General Coordination for Refugees and Displaced in Darfur.

The clashes in Darfur pose a significant challenge to efforts by Sudan’s transitional authorities to end decades-long rebellions in some areas like war-wrecked region.

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HEADLINE	12/06 WHO: Africa urgent need malaria vaccine
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/dec/06/malaria-kills-180000-more-people-annually-than-previously-thought-says-who
GIST	<p>The World Health Organization has called for a “massive, urgent” effort to get the new malaria vaccine into the arms of African children, as it warned that about 180,000 more people were dying annually from the disease than had previously been thought.</p> <p>Dr Pedro Alonso, director of the WHO’s global malaria programme, said the RTS,S vaccine, recommended for widespread rollout in October, represented a historic opportunity to save tens of thousands of lives, mostly those of under-fives in sub-Saharan Africa.</p> <p>But he warned that the global community risked “massive failure” if funding commitments aimed at boosting production and helping deployment of the vaccine were not rapidly made.</p> <p>“What I think is the real barrier [is] international solidarity,” he said. “Is the world going to allow that there is a first malaria vaccine that can save the lives of tens of thousands of African children every year and they’re going to let it sit on a shelf? Or are they going to step up?”</p> <p>The British pharmaceutical company GlaxoSmithKlein, which developed the RTS,S vaccine, has committed to donate up to 10m doses for use in the pilot programmes already under way, and to supply up to 15m doses annually.</p>

However, with more than 240m cases globally last year, the potential demand could reach 80 to 100m doses annually, Alonso warned. “Therefore, this is a prime example of where international mechanisms will need to come into play,” he said.

“A vaccine that could save somewhere between 40 and 70-80,000 lives every year, of African children, is something that needs to be treated with the utmost ambition and sense of urgency. And therefore, a slow, gradual scale-up, if you ask me, would not be acceptable. This needs to be a massive, urgent operation to ensure that we can reach as many children as possible and as soon as possible.”

He added: “If the global health community does not respond to this challenge, it will represent a massive failure. I cannot imagine how different leaders, leaders of philanthropy or of financing institutions, are going to go to Africa and advocate for efforts to prevent childhood deaths if they don’t, first and foremost, support the deployment of this vaccine.”

Last week, the global vaccine alliance, Gavi, said its board had approved an initial \$155.7m (£117m) for the rollout of RTS,S. The funding would help the introduction, procurement and delivery of the vaccine for eligible countries in sub-Saharan Africa from 2022 until 2025, it said.

Dr Abdourahmane Diallo, CEO of the RBM Partnership to End [Malaria](#), said the announcement would give the private sector “a crucial motive to scale up” the rollout.

“We now call on leaders to step up [investment](#) to accelerate the development and delivery of more effective, transformative tools to combat the ever-evolving malaria parasite,” he said.

[New figures released by the WHO on Monday](#) underlined the scale of the problem, with a new, “more precise” method of counting estimating that 627,000 people died of malaria last year, 180,000 more than the total would have been according to the old methodology.

The vast majority of all malaria deaths – 96% – were in sub-Saharan Africa.

In its annual malaria report, the WHO said the “doomsday scenario” some had predicted at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic – that deaths from malaria would double as a result of disruption to treatment and services – had [not materialised](#).

Nonetheless, it said, deaths had risen by nearly 70,000 last year, an increase of 12%, of which nearly 50,000 were attributable to disruptions during the pandemic. One main cause of disruption was that more than a quarter of insecticide-treated bed nets – the backbone of WHO efforts to combat malaria – were not distributed in 2020.

Faced with a slowing of progress in the fight against malaria, the WHO believes the vaccine could be a crucial new weapon, even though questions have been raised over its limited efficacy. Over four years of trials, RTS,S was found to prevent 39% of malaria cases and 29% of severe malaria cases.

But Alonso rejected concerns. “A reduction of 30% [in] severe cases of malaria means a massive public health impact, larger probably than any other vaccine against any other disease being used right now,” he said.

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HEADLINE	12/06 China obscures state of economy
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-data-security-law-ships-ports-court-cases-universities-11638803230?mod=hp_lead_pos5
GIST	China’s Communist Party has long maintained tight control over information, and the effort has intensified under leader Xi Jinping. The country has become increasingly opaque over the past year, even as its presence on the world stage grows.

A new data-security law has made it harder for foreign companies and investors to get information, including about supplies and financial statements. Several providers of ship locations in Chinese waters stopped sharing information outside the country, making it hard to understand port activity there. Chinese authorities have restricted information on coal use, purged documents related to political dissent cases from an official judicial database, and shut down academic exchanges with other countries.

“China has always been a big black box,” said Stephen Nagy, a politics and international studies professor at the International Christian University in Tokyo. The diminishing access to information is making it even harder for foreigners to understand what’s happening in the country, he said, “and that black box becomes even blacker.”

Companies and governments are left trying to figure out how to engage with a country whose economy is approaching America’s in size and whose military is [becoming more assertive](#). Data from the International Monetary Fund suggests that the nation will drive much of the world’s growth over the next two years.

“There is a void about what is happening inside China, but also about its aims and goals as a nation, and this is driving mistrust,” said Cameron Johnson, a management consultant based in China, who speaks annually with lawmakers in Washington, D.C. as part of regular check-ins organized by the American Chamber of Commerce in Shanghai.

China’s increasing secrecy isn’t the result of any single policy, businesspeople and political analysts say, but rather a combination of factors: a response to the pandemic, growing concerns about data security and a political environment in which the outside world is [viewed with suspicion](#).

The U.S. has also taken moves to partially decouple the world’s two largest economies, including limiting [Chinese access to American technology](#) and research universities through trade and [visa restrictions](#).

Faced with increasing antagonism from the U.S. and other democratic governments, Mr. Xi has reversed course from his predecessors’ emphasis on humility and openness to focus on national pride and self-sufficiency. Once a frequent traveler, Mr. Xi hasn’t left the country since he publicly acknowledged the severity of the Covid-19 outbreak in January 2020.

Strict Covid-related border controls, including canceled flights and weekslong quarantines, have added a drastic drop in face-to-face interactions between Chinese citizens and the world, compounding the disconnect. Airlines carried around 1 million people in and out of China over the first eight months of 2021, down from almost 50 million over the same period in 2019, according to data from the Civil Aviation Administration of China.

Some Chinese looking to travel abroad say they have been denied passport renewals or been pulled aside at the airport by border officials who tried to dissuade them from going, citing government directives to minimize travel.

China’s National Immigration Administration didn’t respond to a request for comment.

Data lockdown

One driving force behind the expanding secrecy is a new data-security law that went into effect on Sept. 1, after Chinese officials grew concerned about the transfer of potentially sensitive data overseas. It subjects almost all data-related activities to government oversight, including their collection, storage, use and transmission.

Since the law was passed, companies in mainland China have grown more reluctant to share information with multinationals in strategic sectors like finance, healthcare, public transportation and infrastructure, according to Jonathan Crompton, a Hong Kong-based lawyer at the law firm Reynolds Porter Chamberlain LLP.

Authorities are ambiguous about what constitutes sensitive information, adding uncertainty for Chinese companies over what they can share with foreign partners.

Suppliers of metals like cobalt and lithium used in electronics have grown reluctant to share information with customers outside China, said one executive at a major U.S. technology company. Data the suppliers now consider sensitive includes details like how much of a given metal they have available or what percentage of their supplies are recycled, the person said, making it difficult to plan production and ensure compliance with environmental rules.

Zero2ipo Holdings Inc., which operates one of China's most widely followed databases of investment financing, PE Data, has stopped selling its data to customers based overseas. A spokeswoman said that the company's financing data is only meant for China-based users and for internal use, and that any changes were related to the data-security law and other corporate considerations.

Steve Dickinson, a lawyer at U.S. law firm Harris Bricken, recalled a recent episode in which a U.S. client had asked a Chinese company for audited financial statements to determine whether it was creditworthy. The latter declined, citing Chinese policy that states they can't release financial statements to foreigners, he said. The client had to move forward with the partnership without the information, he said.

The lack of data increases the risk of scams and fraud for companies looking to do business with China, he said. Mr. Dickinson added he also had trouble accessing China's trademark and corporate databases and other Chinese websites from his office in Seattle, resulting in the firm hiring a team in China to do Chinese due diligence and intellectual property work.

In early November, global ship-tracking platforms began to notice disruptions to the flow of location data of vessels in Chinese waters. Some local providers had stopped sharing detailed information of ship positions, citing the new data security law. A Chinese state media report on Nov. 1 described a nationwide crackdown on local providers of such data, citing national security implications.

While satellite imagery is still available, removing access to more detailed, real-time vessel movements around China makes it difficult for companies to accurately track their shipments to and from the world's largest exporting nation, said Nikos Psaltopoulos, chief operations officer at Athens-based global maritime analytics company MarineTraffic. It also hinders the ability of financial institutions to gather information on port activity to make accurate macroeconomic predictions on growth and trade, he said.

Samir Madani, co-founder of oil tanker data site TankerTrackers.com, said that without such precise vessel location data from Chinese providers, it is much more challenging to figure out the volume of China's oil trade with North Korea, Venezuela and Iran, countries that are subject to United Nations or U.S. sanctions.

Last year, with prices of coal creeping higher in China, privately run commodity-pricing providers stopped publishing daily prices and data about Chinese stockpiles.

Fenwei Digital Information Technology, which runs SXcoal.com, with data about China's coal industry, issued a notice that it would stop sharing some pricing data last December to "avoid misjudgment of price trend by market participants." Fenwei didn't respond to requests for comment.

Other closely watched gauges of coal demand, such as stockpiles at Chinese utilities, had gone dark beginning summer 2020. The dearth of data became especially problematic this fall when surging coal prices, in part due to a shortage of domestic supplies, sparked an energy crisis.

One longtime coal analyst in Singapore said that the extent of the power crisis took traders and analysts by surprise because of the lack of timely information about coal demand and use.

Academic approvals

One of the most dramatic reversals in Beijing's openness has been in academia—once seen as a beacon of engagement between China and the West. China has steadily closed off Western scholars' access to research archives and made it more difficult for Chinese universities to host international conferences.

In August, China's Ministry of Education published data showing it had terminated 286 cooperative programs between Chinese and foreign universities in 2018 and 2019, saying some of the programs didn't meet the teaching and instructional standards of the ministry. Schools in the U.K., Russia and the U.S. had the most number of programs cut, and computer science, biotechnology, international economy and trade were the courses most affected, according to an archived version of an official website from September.

More recently, universities have imposed tighter approval processes for scholars in fields such as international relations and Chinese historical research hoping to travel overseas or participate in Zoom calls with foreign scholars.

"In general, we're not meeting and we're not talking," said International Christian University's Mr. Nagy. "We're not having dinner, and we're not walking outside. And that's where you share your ideas and share insights."

The education ministry, in a faxed response to queries, denied that China was tightening controls or hindering cross-border academic engagements. The Covid-19 pandemic "has objectively created obvious obstacles to personnel and academic exchanges between educational institutions in various countries," the ministry said, adding that China will continue opening up to the world.

Jia Qingguo, former dean of the School of International Studies at Beijing's Peking University, noted the stricter academic controls in a plea he submitted at China's annual legislative meetings in March. He added that some government departments had taken measures to tighten management over "various considerations," without specifying what they were.

"Excessive management has cut us off from studying advanced ideas, research methods and political experiences from abroad," Mr. Jia wrote, adding that some universities only allow scholars to interact with foreigners only if at least one other colleague is present. He didn't respond to a request for comment.

Mr. Xi has often demanded efforts to strengthen the party's influence over narratives about China, telling senior officials in May to "pay attention to the strategy and art of waging struggles over public opinion."

In one turnaround, a virtual summit between Messrs. Xi and Biden in mid-November resulted in a mutual loosening of visa restrictions for journalists—a minor thaw in a fight over media access that saw more than a dozen American journalists expelled from China over the past two years and limits placed on the size of Chinese news operations in the U.S.

A survey published by the Beijing-based the Foreign Correspondents' Club of China found that nearly 40% of correspondents surveyed said that sources were harassed, questioned or detained for speaking with them in 2020, up from 25% the year before.

China's government has moved aggressively to remove or hide data that foreign governments and news organizations have used to highlight alleged human-rights abuses in the country. This past summer, China's online court-document database was purged of documents related to speech-related offenses, according to an activist who had used the database to track how the party punishes dissent on social media.

Around the same time, the database was also purged of thousands of court documents from politically sensitive cases related to what the government called "endangering state security," cult-related offenses and judicial reviews of death sentences, according to the Dui Hua Foundation, a San Francisco-based group that advocates for political and religious detainees in China.

In denying public access to such documents, Chinese authorities may be trying to block foreign officials and activists from getting information they use to pressure Beijing into releasing political prisoners,

according to John Kamm, Dui Hua's founder and chairman. "The disclosure rate of sensitive political cases is now zero," he said.

China's Supreme People's Court didn't respond to a request for comment.

Foreign businesses and investors have begun to search for alternatives for gaining visibility into China. Matthew Grey, the co-chief executive officer of TransitionZero, a London-based climate-focused nonprofit, said his group received more than 70 requests for China data from investors and traders, with the most demand coming after it published a report in April that used satellite imagery to estimate the usage of coal-fired power plants in China.

The opacity is likely to increase tensions between China and the U.S. in both the short and long term, according to political analysts and U.S. officials.

U.S. Rep. Jim McGovern (D., Mass.), co-chair of the Congressional-Executive Commission on China, said that the heightened tensions between the U.S. and China have complicated efforts to engage Beijing on human rights and other issues.

"They can be silent all they want. It doesn't make these things go away," he said.

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HEADLINE	1206 Some Seattle PD officers return to dept.
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/local/seattle/former-seattle-officers-returning/281-ca287652-a13a-440c-b508-4e87ef4b8f8f
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — There is a renewed sense of optimism for interim Seattle Police Department (SPD) Chief Adrian Diaz as the department struggles through staffing shortages, rising crime rates and growing response times.</p> <p>Several former officers who left the department within the past year for other opportunities have returned to the SPD. At least six have returned so far, but Diaz said he's expecting more.</p> <p>"A lot of times people come back because of the camaraderie and their fellow officers that they've grown up in the department with, and that matters, but also the trajectory of where the department is leading," said Diaz. "We are pushing initiatives that are cutting edge, that are innovative, and I think people want to be a part of something bigger than them."</p> <p>Seattle is in the process of reshaping the police department to create what it calls a "national standard for modern policing."</p> <p>But since the start of 2020, the SPD has lost at least 339 officers for various reasons. A department spokesperson said 69 officers have been newly hired, and the new 2022 city budget calls for hiring an additional 125 officers.</p> <p>Officer Dion Johnson left the department for a job in Mason County in 2020 after massive cuts were made to the operating budget and hundreds of officer positions were eliminated.</p> <p>"With the state of Seattle last year, I thought that my job was in jeopardy," explained Johnson.</p> <p>Lauren Truscott was all but born to be a police officer. Her father, who was also an SPD officer, was the one to pin her first badge when she graduated from the police academy 21 years ago.</p> <p>"I grew up in Seattle," said Truscott. "I went to Seattle Public Schools. I have long-standing relationships with a lot of community members."</p>

	<p>But after the community began to change in 2020, Truscott left the SPD for a promotion with another police department.</p> <p>“It was really a personal decision for me,” explained Truscott. “I don't think that it was any external factors that changed.”</p> <p>Today, Johnson and Truscott have both returned to Seattle.</p> <p>"[It has] been great coming back and getting back on the saddle here," said Johnson. "I came back mostly because of the cost of living. Also, I just wanted to do other things in policing, and I'm optimistic about Seattle."</p> <p>“It was 100% a decision to return based upon my relationship with the community and the city of Seattle and the Seattle Police Department and the officers there,” explained Truscott."</p> <p>While it’s encouraging some former officers are returning to the department, Diaz said he wants to see a total of 400 officers return or get hired to the department to reach what he calls full staffing.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/06 Recall: Alexander & Hornung products
SOURCE	https://www.upi.com/Top_News/US/2021/12/06/alexander-hornung-recall-ham-pepperoni-listeria/9111638811949/
GIST	<p>Dec. 6 (UPI) -- Alexander & Hornung has voluntarily recalled more than 230,000 pounds of cooked ham and pepperoni products over fears they may have been exposed to listeria, the company announced.</p> <p>The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and Inspection Service said it was notified by the company that product sampling reported positive results for the bacteria.</p> <p>"While there have been no illnesses or complaints associated with the products and there is no conclusive evidence that the products were contaminated at the time of shipment, the voluntary recall is being initiated out of an abundance of caution," Alexander & Hornung said in a statement.</p> <p>The company has recalled 17 products under various brands, including Alexander & Hornung, Wellshire, Garrett Valley Farms, Butcher Boy, Food Club, Open Nature, Niman Ranch, Five Star and Big Y.</p> <p>All of the recalled packages bear establishment number M10125 inside the USDA mark of inspection. Consuming products contaminated with listeria bacteria can lead to listeriosis. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says about 1,600 people are sickened by listeriosis each year and about 260 of them die.</p> <p>Listeriosis most severely infects vulnerable people, including pregnant women, newborns, senior adults and those with weakened immune systems.</p> <p>Symptoms of listeriosis can be similar to the flu, along with headaches, confusion, loss of balance and muscle aches.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/06 US diplomatic boycott Beijing Olympics
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/us-announces-diplomatic-boycott-winter-olympics-china-human/story?id=81583714
GIST	The U.S. will not send an official delegation to the Winter Olympic Games in China early next year, the White House announced Monday, citing China's human rights record.

The diplomatic boycott means that U.S. athletes will still compete in the games, which will start in Beijing in February.

The Chinese government responded with swift condemnation of President Joe Biden's decision -- saying the Olympics shouldn't be "a stage for political shows" and warning of "resolute countermeasures."

But the Biden administration said it would not send senior U.S. government officials because of China's mass detention camps and forced sterilization campaign against Uighurs and other Muslim ethnic minorities in the country's western province -- policies that the U.S. government has determined constitute genocide and crimes against humanity.

Biden has been under growing pressure domestically to take some kind of action against the Beijing games because of China's increasingly authoritarian policies at home and aggressive actions across the region.

Sending prominent officials or public figures to the Olympics is a long tradition, with first lady Jill Biden leading a delegation to the summer Olympics in Japan this year.

The Biden administration has said it is consulting U.S. allies on a path forward, but so far, no other country has announced a similar diplomatic boycott. Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and others are said to be weighing boycotts as well.

Beijing has repeatedly blasted any talk of a boycott, denouncing it as an affront to the "Olympic spirit" while denying any wrongdoing in its human rights record.

"U.S. politicians continue to hype diplomatic boycotts of the Beijing Winter Olympics. They are completely wishful-thinking, grandstanding and politically manipulative," said Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian.

It's also unclear if any American officials were formally invited to the games, where they usually attend the opening or closing ceremonies. Zhao said Monday that "American politicians" were not invited, without specifying who exactly or whether foreign delegations in general were.

Biden has tried to stabilize U.S.-Chinese relations, which have nosedived in recent years as Washington has grown increasingly concerned about Chinese aggression. He and Chinese leader Xi Jinping held a meeting last month via video teleconference, marking small progress on issues like China's travel bans on dual citizens and journalists visas.

But tensions have remained high over China's development of hypersonic and nuclear weapons, its menacing of Taiwan, and its human rights record, from the crackdown on democracy in Hong Kong, religious practice across the country, and especially the Uighurs in Xinjiang province. The detention of over one million Uighurs, the sterilization of Uighur women, and their forced labor in these camps has drawn U.S. sanctions and international condemnation.

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HEADLINE	12/06 Omicron moves fast; less severe illness?
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/06/world/africa/omicron-coronavirus-research-spread.html
GIST	<p>JOHANNESBURG — The Covid-19 virus is spreading faster than ever in South Africa, the country's president said Monday, an indication of how the new Omicron variant is driving the pandemic, but there are early indications that Omicron may cause less serious illness than other forms of the virus.</p> <p>Researchers at a major hospital complex in Pretoria reported that their patients with the coronavirus are much less sick than those they have treated before, and that other hospitals are seeing the same trends. In fact, they said, most of their infected patients were admitted for other reasons and have no Covid symptoms.</p>

But scientists cautioned against placing too much stock in either the potential good news of less severity, or bad news like early evidence that prior coronavirus infection [offers little immunity](#) to Omicron. The variant was discovered just last month, and more study is needed before experts can say much about it with confidence. Beyond that, the true impact of the coronavirus is not always felt immediately, with hospitalizations and deaths often lagging considerably behind initial outbreaks.

Dr. Emily S. Gurley, an epidemiologist at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, said of the signs that the variant is less severe, “It would not be shocking if that’s true, but I’m not sure we can conclude that yet.”

In the absence of more hard information, governments have reacted to Omicron with sharp restrictions on international travel and new vaccination requirements. World leaders who were accused of responding too slowly or weakly earlier in the pandemic are eager to be seen as taking action, though some experts question whether the travel restrictions are an overreaction.

The variant has spread rapidly and has been detected in more than 30 countries on six continents so far. Health officials and researchers say that it could be the most contagious form of the virus yet, and that it could soon displace the Delta variant that emerged last year as the predominant form. That has fueled fears that a world eager to emerge from two years of pandemic hardship could be headed into another cycle of illness, lockdown and economic suffering.

In Europe, as in South Africa, there are early indications that Omicron cases may be fairly mild, if easy to contract.

In Britain, the government said Monday that the number of Omicron cases there had climbed to 336, two and a half times as many as on Friday. Denmark reported 261 cases, quadruple the number on Friday, and local media there have reported that a holiday lunch for high school students may have been a superspreader event, with dozens of people catching the new variant.

Britain and Denmark do an unusually large amount of genomic sequencing of virus samples, to tell one variant from another and detect changes, which suggests that many Omicron cases in other countries are simply going undetected.

On Monday, the United States began requiring international travelers arriving in the country to provide proof of a negative coronavirus test taken no more than 24 hours before their flights, a standard that can be hard to meet. Previously, fully vaccinated travelers could show negative test results taken up to 72 hours before departure.

China, a major part of the global travel and tourism economy, announced that to maintain its zero-Covid approach, it would keep international flights at 2.2 percent of pre-Covid levels during the winter. Since August, it has almost entirely stopped issuing new passports, and it requires arriving travelers to quarantine for 14 days and provide extensive paperwork and multiple virus tests.

In South Africa, where scientists say Omicron is already dominant, the pandemic is surging once again. A month ago, South Africa had fewer than 300 new virus cases a day; on Friday and again on Saturday, the figure was more than 16,000. It fell somewhat on Sunday and Monday, but that may be due a reporting lag often seen on weekends.

“As the country heads into a fourth wave of Covid-19 infections, we are experiencing a rate of infections that we have not seen since the pandemic started,” President Cyril Ramaphosa wrote in an open letter to the country. He added: “Nearly a quarter of all Covid-19 tests now come back positive. Compare this to two weeks ago, when the proportion of positive tests was sitting at around 2 percent.”

A [report released this weekend](#) from doctors at the Steve Biko Academic and Tshwane District Hospital Complex in Pretoria, South Africa’s administrative capital, offers the strongest support yet for a more

hopeful take on Omicron, though its author, Dr. Fareed Abdullah, gave reasons to be wary of drawing conclusions.

Dr. Abdullah, director of the Office of H.I.V./Aids and Tuberculosis Research at the South African Medical Research Council, looked at the 42 patients with coronavirus who were in the hospital last Thursday, and found that 29 of them, 70 percent, were breathing ordinary air. Of the 13 using supplemental oxygen, four had it for reasons unrelated to Covid.

Only one of the 42 was in intensive care, in line with figures released last week by the National Institute of Communicable Diseases, showing that only 106 patients were in intensive care over the prior two weeks, despite the surge in infections.

Most of the patients were admitted “for diagnoses unrelated to Covid-19,” the report said, and their infection “is an incidental finding in these patients and is largely driven by hospital policy requiring testing of all patients.” It said that two other large hospitals in Gauteng Province, which includes Pretoria and Johannesburg, had even lower percentages of infected patients needing oxygen.

Dr. Abdullah said in an interview that he had walked into a Covid ward and found a scene unrecognizable from previous phases of the pandemic, when it would have been full of the humming and beeping of oxygen machines.

“Out of 17 patients, four were on oxygen,” he said. “That’s not in a Covid ward for me, that’s like a normal ward.”

Dr. Gurley, of Johns Hopkins, noted that the severity of disease reflects not just the variant but also who it is infecting. Two years into the pandemic, far more people have some level of immunity to the virus through vaccination, natural infection, or both, and that could translate to milder cases.

“We don’t know how to read the genetic sequences to say exactly how this variant will play out,” she said. “We’re getting more information now from South Africa, which is a particular population with a particular profile of pre-existing immunity.”

Dr. Maria D. van Kerkhove, the World Health Organization’s technical lead for Covid, told CBS News on Sunday, that even if it turns out that a lower percentage of Omicron cases are serious, that could be balanced by a larger number of cases, meaning more hospitalizations and deaths.

Dr. Abdullah also looked at all 166 patients with the coronavirus who were admitted to the Biko-Tshwane complex between Nov. 14 and Nov. 29, and found that their average hospital stay was just 2.8 days, and fewer than 7 percent died. Over the previous 18 months, the average stay for such patients was 8.5 days, and 17 percent died. Shorter stays would mean less strain on hospitals.

Eighty percent of the 166 patients were under age 50, and similar figures have been reported throughout Gauteng — a sharp contrast to earlier cohorts of hospitalized Covid patients, who were usually older. That could result from South Africa having a relatively high vaccination rate in people over 50 and a low rate in younger people, but one of the great unknowns about Omicron is whether existing vaccines offer strong protection against it.

Part of the caution in interpreting Dr. Abdullah’s report is that the numbers in it are small, the findings have not been peer-reviewed, and he does not know how many of the patients had Omicron, as opposed to other variants of the coronavirus — though the government reported last week that it already accounted for three-quarters of virus samples in South Africa.

Dr. Abdullah acknowledged those drawbacks, and noted there could be a lag between Omicron first turning up and a rise in serious illness and deaths. But so far, despite the huge increase in cases, Covid deaths have not risen in South Africa.

HEADLINE	12/06 Stricter testing rules travelers flying to US
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/06/world/omicron-variant-covid#us-travel-covid-testing-rules
GIST	<p>The United States began requiring international travelers on Monday to provide proof of a negative coronavirus test taken no more than a day before their flights. The move, intended to limit the spread of the Omicron variant, is causing headaches for many passengers.</p> <p>Previously, fully vaccinated travelers could provide proof of a negative test taken within 72 hours of departure. The new requirement may be difficult for some to satisfy, because it can take more than a day to receive test results.</p> <p>The new rules have some travelers wondering if they can stick to their planned itineraries. They are one more hurdle to clear for Americans who are living outside the United States and for foreigners hoping to visit for Christmas and New Year's. From London to Taipei, travelers have been thinking about the scenarios that could emerge on a trip, like what would happen if a flight is canceled or if the traveler tests positive along the way.</p> <p>August Dichter, 24, said on Monday that he had already spent two to three hours trying to figure out how to meet the testing requirement for his scheduled flight on Thursday to Philadelphia from London. Mr. Dichter, an American who just completed a yearlong master's degree program in Wales, said he had gotten conflicting messages from the airline, with some guidelines describing the new requirement and others still saying he had a 72-hour window.</p> <p>Mr. Dichter said he had been looking forward to traveling around Europe during his studies, but that it had not been easy.</p> <p>"It's been a lot of hoops to jump through, and I know that I'm going to be able to jump through them all," he said. "But they seem to just keep being so tedious, and to add up, and make the arrival of coming home feel just a little further away."</p> <p>Another American, Candace Thomas, and her partner, James Ridgers, flew to London from Los Angeles last week for a funeral and said that keeping up with the rule changes has been difficult.</p> <p>"It's been very confusing," said Ms. Thomas, 36, as she and Mr. Ridgers, 43, waited in a long line at St. Pancras train station in London on Monday to get tested before their flight on Tuesday.</p> <p>"I'm confused right now, actually," Mr. Ridgers said, because the couple did not have an appointment at the St. Pancras testing center and were unsure if they needed one. They found out soon after that they could not get tested as walk-ins, and made an appointment for three hours later.</p> <p>The start to their trip was complicated, too. They arrived before Britain's two-day quarantine requirement came into effect and ended up quarantining unnecessarily for a day because they were unsure whether the requirement applied to them. New rules also required a P.C.R. test, so they spent more than 80 British pounds (\$106) each on tests for Day 2 of their trip.</p> <p>"Every morning, it was waking up to tune in to the news to find out if it had changed or if we were going to need to quarantine for longer, or if we were even going to be able to come home," Ms. Thomas said. "It was really touch-and-go there for a little while."</p> <p>More than a dozen countries around the world, including the United States, have gone a step beyond testing requirements and have barred travelers who have recently been in any of eight southern African countries. Health experts have criticized that policy and have urged caution, because so little is known yet about the Omicron variant, which was first detected and sequenced less than two weeks ago in South Africa.</p>

	<p>Dr. Rochelle P. Walensky, the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, tried to add some perspective on Sunday on the ABC News program “This Week.”</p> <p>“What we don’t yet know is how transmissible it will be, how well our vaccines will work, whether it will lead to more severe disease,” Dr. Walensky said.</p> <p>The stricter testing requirement for inbound travelers took effect just as airline travel was experiencing a rebound. The Sunday after Thanksgiving was the busiest travel day at U.S. airports since February 2020, according to the Transportation Security Administration.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/06 France closes nightclubs for 4 weeks
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/06/world/omicron-variant-covid#france-closes-nightclubs-for-four-weeks-but-rejects-adding-other-major-restrictions
GIST	<p>France is closing nightclubs in the country for four weeks and tightening some Covid-19 rules in primary schools, mostly around masks, officials said on Monday. But they announced few other restrictions, and continue to hope that booster shots and better social distancing will be enough to stem a recent surge in coronavirus cases.</p> <p>Prime Minister Jean Castex and Health Minister Olivier Véran said at a news conference Monday evening that children aged 5 to 11 who have certain health conditions would be eligible for vaccination, and that people 65 and older could get booster shots anywhere without an appointment.</p> <p>The government explained the decision to close nightclubs by saying that a large share of new infections were in young people, and that it was difficult to wear masks in clubs.</p> <p>But, mindful of pandemic weariness less than five months before a presidential election, French leaders are mostly bucking the recent European trend toward tighter restrictions.</p> <p>“The time is not for gauges, curfews or lockdowns — that would be disproportionate,” Mr. Castex said. “However, the circumstances require an individual and collective effort to ensure everyone limits risks of contamination.”</p> <p>Mr. Castex urged companies to let employees work from home as much as possible, and encouraged people to limit end-of-year social interactions like Christmas parties.</p> <p>France did not move up the start of December school holidays by a week, as Belgium did, nor has France shown any willingness to make vaccination mandatory or impose restrictions on the unvaccinated, as Germany and Italy have done.</p> <p>Reports of new coronavirus cases in France are climbing to near 43,000 a day. More than 12,000 Covid-19 patients are currently hospitalized in France, the most since August, and hospitals around the country are being strained.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/06 Ukraine: grinding war, invasion anticipation
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/06/world/europe/ukraine-russia-war-front.html
GIST	<p>AVDIIVKA, Ukraine — Machine gun fire broke the stillness just after 8 p.m. when Capt. Denis Branitskii was midway through the evening patrol. The shots came in sporadic bursts and were close by, fired by Russian-backed separatists whose positions were obscured in the darkness. Only when the flash of a rocket-propelled grenade illuminated the newly fallen snow did Captain Branitskii break his stride, briefly pausing to take cover before moving on.</p>

“This happens every night,” said Capt. Branitskii, a cleft-chinned company commander with the Ukrainian military’s 25th Airborne Brigade, positioned along the front lines in eastern Ukraine. “Sometimes it’s much heavier, sometimes it’s like tonight. Tonight, this is fine.”

This is what the war has been like for years, a slow, bloody grind that set in after both sides fought to a stalemate over territory seized by Russian-backed forces in 2014. Now Ukrainian and Western officials say something more ominous could be building.

In recent weeks, they have warned that Russia was erecting the architecture for significant military action, possibly even a full-fledged invasion. U.S. intelligence officials [have assessed that Moscow](#) has drawn up plans for a military offensive involving an estimated 175,000 troops to begin as early as next year. Recent satellite photos show a buildup in equipment, including tanks and artillery.

President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia has countered that it was the Ukrainians with their American and Western European backers who were instigating a war, citing what he calls security threats to Russia, including NATO exercises in the Black Sea.

Amid mounting anxiety, Mr. Putin and President Biden will speak by video conference on Tuesday. The White House said Mr. Biden would “reaffirm the United States’ support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine.”

Mr. Putin has made his position clear. “It is not we who are threatening anyone,” he said last week, “and accusing us of this, given the reality on the ground, or as we say to shift the blame from the person who’s sick in the head to the healthy one, is at minimum irresponsible.”

For the fighters dug into an ant farm of muddy trenches on both sides of the conflict in Ukraine, talk of a new war might seem puzzling. For them, the old one never ended. A 2015 cease-fire between the Ukrainian government and the Russian-backed forces in two separatist enclaves brought an end to the most serious hostilities in a conflict that has cost more than 13,000 lives. But it did not bring peace.

What is known as the “line of contact” separating the two sides regularly crackles with gunfire punctuated with the occasional boom of artillery. A handful of Ukrainian soldiers is killed each month, mostly by sniper fire. There were seven in September, two in October and six in November. Last week, a 22-year-old soldier named Valeriy Herovkin became the first killed in December.

So far, soldiers on the front lines said they had seen little evidence of escalation beyond this largely slow-moving war of attrition. Compared with the vicious fighting that preceded it, this is a holiday, several soldiers said.

But after eight years in the trenches there is a weary acceptance that the status quo cannot last forever, that the Russian military, which dwarfs their own in power and wealth, will likely come sooner or later. If that moment is now at hand, they said, so be it.

“I studied at university and my head is screwed on right, so I recognize perfectly well the danger the Russian army presents, and that no one can guarantee that Putin or anyone else won’t suddenly say, ‘Forward!’” said First Lt. Ivan Skuratovsky, a stoic, 30-year-old father of two who has been fighting since the war broke out in 2014. “We’re prepared for this turn of events because this is our job and none but us is in a position to confront this threat.”

“Are we scared of an open offensive?” he added. “I just don’t see that in people.”

The soldiers are on heightened alert anyway, aware that in this period of explosive tensions, an errant bullet or mortar shell could be all that is needed to touch off a serious escalation. Even when fired upon, they are under strict orders not to respond unless absolutely necessary.

On the night I joined Capt. Branitskii on patrol, forces under his command returned fire only once. “Just to let them know we’re here,” Captain Branitskii said. The thwomp of a Ukrainian soldier’s grenade launcher silenced the machine gun fire on the other side, but only briefly.

“This really annoys the soldiers that we’re not allowed to respond,” said Lieutenant Skuratovsky.

Since August, the 25th Airborne Brigade has been posted to an area on the outskirts of the Ukrainian town of Avdiivka known as the Promzona, a base built into the skeletal remains of a tire factory. The site of nasty fighting at the start of the war, the factory complex is now eerily silent save for the rush of wind through bullet strafed passageways and the banging of loose metal sheeting.

It abuts a neighborhood of country cottages, most just burned out shells now. The houses were abandoned quickly and long ago. Children’s toys can be seen scattered in some yards and the offspring of left-behind family pets prowl the overgrown gardens.

Snipers are a constant menace, and the walls of frontline positions are posted with photos of the gruesome injuries suffered by those who dropped their guard.

Viewed through a hand-held periscope, the landscape on the other side appears post-apocalyptic with blown out houses set amid thickets of twisted, leafless walnut trees. Only an occasional puff of smoke from a wood-fired stove gives away the separatists’ locations.

Though the fighters on the other side are no more than a few dozen meters away in some places, the Ukrainian soldiers confessed to knowing little about them. The dislike for their enemy is severe though these were once citizens of a united country. “These are the lowest strata of society who have not been able to find themselves in any other profession,” said Lt. Tatyana Zaritskaya, a former kindergarten teacher who joined the war effort in 2014.

Another company commander, Oleksandr Timoshchuk, has studied his opponents from his perch in a corner of a factory building about 50 yards from where they’re positioned. He said three or four times a month, probably around payday, “they start up the discothèque,” get drunk and take pot shots at his position.

A separatist “gets wasted, steps outside probably to relieve himself, tosses a grenade and goes back in,” he said.

The Ukrainian military has made significant progress since 2014, when it nearly disintegrated in the face of a lightning operation by Russian forces to seize territory, first by annexing the Crimean Peninsula and then by fomenting a separatist takeover in the provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk.

Ukrainian troops have since fought alongside NATO forces in Afghanistan and Iraq and trained with American military advisers.

If a full-on attack comes, Ukrainian forces are as ready to face it as they’ve ever been, said Gen. Oleksandr Pavlyuk, commander of the Joint Forces Operation battling the separatists. But even this, he acknowledged, will not be enough to hold off the Russian military without significant assistance from western countries, specifically the United States.

Some military analysts have said that, faced with a full invasion by vastly superior forces, Ukraine would at best manage an organized retreat. General Pavlyuk cited the many citizens in Ukraine with military experience and suggested the conflict might evolve to something akin to insurgency, with Ukrainians fighting the Russians block by block and house by house.

But the war would take a disastrous toll.

“This is a beast who has tasted blood,” General Pavlyuk said. “Believe me, the losses are going to be horrible on both sides — thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands. On their side and ours.”

For those on the front charged with paying attention, there is a subtle but palpable change in the air even if unnoticed by regular soldiers.

“In the last month or month and a half everything has become more frequent,” said a masked and helmeted military intelligence commander who would only give his name as Ilya. “Shelling is more frequent, from both artillery and small arms. Drones have started flying more often and if before they did not drop bombs, now they’ve come up with a system for doing so.”

“It’s a full-on activation.”

Ilya’s team had turned the inside of a bombed-out apartment into an observation post on the front lines near the town of Marinka, 35 miles from Avdiivka. A section of the wall is still decorated with the former owner’s pink wallpaper, but the living room window has been blown out and is now reinforced with sandbags and covered with green mesh netting. This vantage gives Ilya and his team an expansive view of their opponent’s positions.

All was quiet. Or so it seemed.

“Don’t lean out too much, there might be a sniper,” Ilya warned. “Just two days ago, a guy was shot and didn’t make it.”

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HEADLINE	12/06 NYC vaccine mandate private employers
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/06/world/omicron-variant-covid#nyc-vaccine-mandate-deblasio
GIST	<p>Mayor Bill de Blasio announced a sweeping coronavirus vaccine mandate for all private employers in New York City on Monday morning to combat the spread of the Omicron variant.</p> <p>Mr. de Blasio said the aggressive measure, which takes effect Dec. 27 and which he described as the first of its kind in the nation, was needed as a “pre-emptive strike” to stall another wave of coronavirus cases and help reduce transmission during the winter months and holiday gatherings.</p> <p>“Omicron is here, and it looks like it’s very transmissible,” he said in an interview on MSNBC. “The timing is horrible with the winter months.”</p> <p>New York City has already put vaccine mandates in place for city workers and for indoor dining, entertainment and gyms. Nearly 90 percent of adults in the city now have at least one dose of the vaccine.</p> <p>But Mr. de Blasio said the city must go further to combat another wave of the virus in New York City, once the center of the pandemic. Some private employers have required employees to get vaccinated, but many others have not. Mr. de Blasio said the new measure would apply to about 184,000 businesses.</p> <p>The mayor also announced that the rules for dining and entertainment would apply to children ages 5 to 11, who must have one dose to enter restaurants and theaters starting on Dec. 14, and that the requirement for adults would increase from one dose of a vaccine to two starting on Dec. 27, except for those who initially received the one-shot Johnson & Johnson vaccine.</p> <p>Mr. de Blasio and Gov. Kathy Hochul held a news conference last Thursday to announce New York State’s first five cases of the Omicron variant, and several more have been announced in New York City since then. The number of coronavirus cases in the city has increased rapidly in recent weeks; daily case counts have increased more than 75 percent since Nov. 1.</p>

Mr. de Blasio, a Democrat with less than a month left in office, said he was confident the new mandate would survive any legal challenges and he noted that past city mandates had been upheld.

“They have won in court — state court, federal court — every single time,” the mayor said on MSNBC. “And it’s because they’re universal and consistent.”

Eric Adams, the mayor-elect who takes office on Jan. 1, is on vacation in Ghana this week. His spokesman, Evan Thies, said in a statement that Mr. Adams would evaluate the measure once he is mayor.

“The mayor-elect will evaluate this mandate and other Covid strategies when he is in office and make determinations based on science, efficacy and the advice of health professionals,” he said.

The Biden administration tried to set a federal mandate that all large employers must require workers to get vaccinated or submit to weekly testing starting in January, but that measure is [stalled in court](#).

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration, or OSHA, [issued an “emergency” rule](#) earlier this month requiring vaccinations for employees of companies with at least 100 workers, although it exempts those who work at home or exclusively outdoors.

Kathryn Wylde, the president of a prominent business group, the Partnership for New York City, said she was surprised by the announcement by Mr. de Blasio.

“We were blindsided,” she said. “There’s no forewarning, no discussion, no idea about whether it’s legal or who he expects to enforce it.”

Roughly half of Manhattan office employers have enacted vaccine mandates, she said, though some policies include testing options and medical and religious exemptions.

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HEADLINE	12/06 Urea chemical short supply: world feels it
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/06/business/urea-fertilizer-food-prices.html
GIST	<p>This is a story about one of those unsung forces that quietly keep the world running. It is a story about the clockwork interconnectedness of modern civilization, about how disturbances in one part of the planet can kick up storms in another.</p> <p>This is a story, naturally, about urea.</p> <p>Prices for the humble chemical — yes, the stuff in urine — are soaring to levels not seen in over a decade. In this time of everything shortages and inflation worries, that alone might not sound too surprising. But urea links up several disparate-looking strands of global economic disruption, showing how easily extreme weather and shipping turmoil can cause supply shortfalls to radiate.</p> <p>People and industries of all kinds are feeling the shocks. In India, a lack of urea has made farmers fear for their livelihoods. In South Korea, it meant truck drivers couldn’t start their engines.</p> <p>Urea is an important type of agricultural fertilizer, so rising prices could ultimately mean higher costs at dinner tables around the world. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization’s index of food prices is already at its highest level since 2011. The coronavirus pandemic has caused huge numbers of people to face hunger, and increased food prices could cause even more to have trouble meeting basic dietary needs. Prices of two other widely used plant foods are skyrocketing as well.</p> <p>One big reason for surging fertilizer prices is surging prices of coal and natural gas. The urea in your urine is produced in the liver. The industrial kind is made through a century-old process that turns natural gas or gas derived from coal into ammonia, which is then used to synthesize urea.</p>

But a freakish confluence of other factors is pushing up prices as well.

China and Russia, two of the biggest producers, have restricted exports to ensure supplies for their own farmers. In China's case, an [energy crunch](#) led some areas to ration electricity, which [forced fertilizer factories](#) to [slash production](#).

Hurricane Ida drove several large chemical plants to [suspend operations](#) when it tore through the U.S. Gulf Coast in August. Western [sanctions on Belarus](#) have hit that nation's production of potash, the key ingredient in another fertilizer. Port delays and high freight fees — plant food is bulky stuff — have added to costs.

All of this is rippling around the world in unexpected and sometimes painful ways.

In India, fears of fertilizer shortages have led [crowds of desperate farmers](#) to gather outside government distribution centers and [clash with the police](#).

Truckers in South Korea have worried about not being able to work. The reason? Urea goes into an industrial elixir that reduces trucks' greenhouse gas emissions and that South Korea doesn't allow diesel engines to start without.

Britons have [fretted](#) about running out of the tiny bubbles in their carbonated drinks. Why? A big fertilizer maker, CF Industries, [halted operations](#) at two plants in England in September, citing high natural gas prices. And food-grade carbon dioxide is a byproduct of the ammonia production process. One of the two plants has since restarted production.

As for the big question of whether food prices are about to shoot up globally, John Baffes, a World Bank economist who studies commodity markets, said he believed farmers had already largely locked in fertilizer prices for the current crop season.

But a different picture could emerge early next year, when the U.S. Department of Agriculture [publishes the first results](#) of its yearly survey of American farmers' planting intentions. These will give clues about how growers worldwide are responding to the latest market conditions.

"Normally, those are boring reports," Mr. Baffes said. "Nobody knows about them. Nobody reads them." Not this time, he said.

"If we see coal prices and natural gas prices staying at the levels we are seeing currently, then we are certainly going to see higher food prices," he said. "There's no question about it."

China is a linchpin of the global fertilizer trade. The country accounts for about a tenth of the world's urea-based fertilizer exports and a third of exports of diammonium phosphate, another type of crop nutrient, according to the [World Bank](#).

As prices of fuel and fertilizer began rising this year, [China's cabinet in June authorized](#) billions of dollars in subsidies and other support for farmers. The next month, the country's major fertilizer producers met with the state planning agency and [agreed to halt exports](#).

In the fall, [soaring electricity demand](#) led the southwestern province of Yunnan, a key phosphate producer, to [order drastic production cuts](#) by energy-hungry industries, including fertilizer. And in October, China's customs authority [imposed extra inspection requirements](#) on exports of 29 fertilizers and related products.

China's leaders have been paying much more attention to food security since the pandemic began, said Darin Friedrichs of [Sitonia Consulting](#), an advisory firm in Shanghai that focuses on Chinese agricultural markets.

“They were probably ahead of the curve in realizing how much this was going to disrupt global supply chains,” Mr. Friedrichs said. “And in a situation like that, it’s obviously better to err on the side of trying to have more food rather than less.”

South Korea relies heavily on Chinese urea for the industrial fluid that breaks down harmful gases in diesel exhaust. Under the country’s environmental regulations, electronic control systems in diesel trucks prevent the engine from running when the urea tank is empty.

As prices of urea solution soared as much as tenfold last month, some South Korean truck drivers said they had forfeited jobs that would consume more urea, such as ones involving long distances or big hills. On a construction site, if just one heavy-duty vehicle runs out of urea, the entire project might be paralyzed.

“If my truck stops, my family’s livelihood, my children’s tuition, everything stops,” said Kim Jung-suk, 47, who drives a dump truck in Seoul.

Kim Woo-hyun, 50 — another driver, and no relation — said he spent evenings and weekends in pursuit of urea.

“I would call up a bunch of gas stations until one said it had some left over, and make an appointment with them to pick it up,” Mr. Kim said. “Then I’d show up, and it would be gone.”

South Korea airlifted thousands of gallons of urea from Australia before [striking a deal with China](#) to allow a few months’ supply to be imported.

More than half of China’s urea exports this year have gone to India. The Indian government subsidizes fertilizer to keep prices low, but distributing it to growers requires coordination between national and state authorities who are often at odds for partisan and other reasons.

When the fertilizer squeeze hit this fall, Danpal Yadav, 44, a rice grower in the central state of Madhya Pradesh, was already reeling under debt because of low crop yields last season. After coming home empty-handed from visits to government fertilizer distribution centers, he grew anguished and talked about suicide, his family said.

Time was running out for Mr. Yadav to nourish his fields. On Oct. 28, after sleeping outside a fertilizer center for three days and getting nothing, he returned home and bolted the door.

His brother Vivek later found him unconscious. He had consumed poison. Doctors declared him dead at a hospital.

“He was desperately trying to find fertilizer,” Vivek Yadav said. “This is the story of every farmer during this season.”

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HEADLINE	12/06 China property market nears reckoning
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/06/business/china-evergrande-kaisa-property.html
GIST	<p>China’s debt-loaded property market is headed for a reckoning, as China Evergrande Group and another troubled housing developer face deadlines for millions of dollars worth of payments in a test of Beijing’s narrative that it can handle the threat to the Chinese economy.</p> <p>Evergrande, with bills totaling \$300 billion or more, will need to come up with more than \$82 million in cash by the end of Monday in the United States to fend off creditors. The developer said late last week that it was unable to make a separate payment worth \$260 million, an indication investors took to mean the beginning of its eventual demise. Its shares tumbled by 20 percent on Monday in Asia.</p>

The other [developer in distress](#), Kaisa Group, must pay bondholders \$400 million on Tuesday after it [said](#) it failed last week to get approval from investors to renegotiate the terms.

China's property sector has kept global markets on edge for months, as developers have [struggled to find cash](#) to pay their soaring debts. They have been hampered by [slowing demand](#) from home buyers, falling property prices in many Chinese cities and Beijing's crackdown on excessive bank lending.

Chinese property developers have \$1.3 billion in U.S. dollar bond payments due this month. By April, that number will jump to \$17 billion, according to an estimate by Goldman Sachs.

If Evergrande and Kaisa miss their payments, China's leaders could find themselves in a difficult position. They risk destabilizing the property market and the financial system if big companies suddenly collapse. But if they step in to help, they could send a message that they will come to the rescue of property companies that built up mountains of debt.

"The regulators are now between a rock and a hard place," said Larry Hu, the chief China economist at the Macquarie Group

"If they blink, more excessive risk-taking will definitely come in the future," he added. "If they don't, the property downturn would inflict more pain on the economy."

Chinese leaders have a [broad array of tools](#) at their disposal to stop a panic, including their tight grip on the banking and finance sectors, and their ability to silence shocking headlines in the news media. Still, the authorities are taking extra steps to stem the damage.

On Monday, Chinese banking regulators [loosened](#) the amount of money banks are required to stash away for a rainy day, giving them greater ability to lend amid the property woes and signs of a growth slowdown. The Communist Party's Politburo on Monday [said](#) the government should "support the commercial housing market to better meet the reasonable housing needs of home buyers and promote the healthy development and virtuous cycle of the real estate industry."

This weekend, officials in the southern province of Guangdong, where Evergrande is headquartered, sent a team of experts to the company to help it fix its finances. The authorities did not clarify whether they were prepared to intervene to keep it afloat.

The move came after Evergrande shocked both the market and regulators by disclosing late on Friday that it would no longer be able to fulfill its financial obligations and that it would begin discussions with its creditors over a plan to restructure its debt. The government then summoned Evergrande's founder, Xu Jiayin, while regulators issued a flurry of statements to assure the market that the company's woes would not spill over into the broader economy.

Chinese regulators blamed Evergrande's management for its problems, while trying to persuade the public that the rest of the financial system was safe. The central bank pointed the finger at Evergrande's "poor management and reckless expansion." The banking and insurance regulator [said](#) it was concerned about recent developments but added that Evergrande's problems would not have any "negative impact on the normal operations" of the finance industry. The securities regulator [said](#) the property sector as a whole remained "healthy" and pledged to support the "reasonable and normal financing" of developers.

By loosening lending while striking a strident tone against Evergrande, China's leaders appear to be signaling that they are prepared to let the company fail but are taking steps to ensure that the broader economy is protected, said Tao Wang, chief China economist at the Swiss bank UBS.

"It seems that at least one question surrounding Evergrande has been answered — that the company is not 'too big to fail,' in terms of default," Ms. Wang said.

Many of the problems in China's property sector stem from [government decisions](#) to tame the reckless borrowing habits of China's biggest real estate developers. Worried about a housing bubble, the central bank created "three red lines" last year: rules that forced property companies to get their debt levels down before seeking more money.

Evergrande's financial troubles, which [first emerged](#) over the summer, have spilled over into the broader property market, making it harder for other developers to raise money. In September, the company [alarmed](#) global markets after it came [close to defaulting](#) on a U.S. dollar bond payment. Since then, Evergrande has made a series of [11th-hour payments](#) on other bonds.

Cut off from bank financing, soon other property developers found the dollar bond market was also becoming harder to tap.

On paper, Evergrande has more than \$300 billion of unpaid bills to bondholders, suppliers and others, while some analysts estimate it might have nearly that much off the books as well. New financial obligations have also begun to appear, like high-interest loan repayments that it owed to employees after [strong-arming them](#) into lending cash when it was in a tight spot earlier this year. And when Evergrande said last week that bondholders had demanded a \$260 million payment, it was the first time the company had publicly acknowledged the obligation.

Evergrande may have additional hidden debts of more than \$156 billion, according to one estimate from Goldman Sachs.

Several [other property developers](#) have defaulted on their debts, including Fantasia, a luxury real estate company that surprised the market because it had never missed a payment.

It is unclear how far Beijing will go to stop the risk of contagion in the broader industry. Kaisa, under pressure to make a final payment on its bond on Tuesday, is China's largest borrower of overseas debt after Evergrande.

More developers have looming deadlines for payments. China Aoyuan Property Group, a smaller developer, said investors were demanding \$651 million in bond payments.

To survive, Chinese property companies may need to find new sources of cash.

Fantasia on Monday offered a glimpse at how it hopes to cope. On its social media account, it published an interview with Pan Jun, the chairman, with the headline "Confront a person with the fear of death and they will fight to live."

Mr. Pan described how the company bid for land earlier this year even as it wasn't finding new capital. He also said that the company had not fully understood the significance of Beijing's three red lines.

"The government already regulates and repeats the regulations over and over again," Mr. Pan said. "But we don't have a department to give us risk warnings."

Now that the company had learned from its mistakes, he said, it would actively communicate with its bondholders and regulators every day.

Referring to the phenomenon of "lying flat," in which some young Chinese people try to take it easy rather than follow an intense work life, Mr. Pan added, "we don't lie flat."

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HEADLINE	12/06 DHS embellished record on outreach
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/6/alejandro-mayorkas-dhs-misrepresent-involvement-of/

The Homeland Security Department, battling to defend its rules limiting arrests and deportations of illegal immigrants, submitted documents to a federal court that misrepresented the involvement of sheriffs' offices and victim advocates.

Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas and other senior department leaders consulted heavily with immigrant rights groups in crafting the rules. They said in filings with a federal judge that they also consulted with sheriffs and with one group that represents victims of crimes committed by illegal immigrants.

Those involved vehemently dispute that account.

"How about none?" said Don Rosenberg, president of Advocates for Victims of Illegal Alien Crime. "Did they ever contact us and say, 'We want to talk to you about our policy and how we're going to do this?' Absolutely, 100% no."

The type of outreach Mr. Mayorkas and his aides conducted is more than a matter of record-keeping. The government told a federal court that information the secretary gathered from meetings helped him form the decisions he detailed in a Sept. 30 memo about which immigrants can be targets for arrest and deportation.

Those rules are already the subjects of legal battles. Opponents say they were written in violation of regulatory procedures.

If he embellished input from pro-enforcement groups, as they charge, that could be used as evidence that Mr. Mayorkas' decisions were arbitrary.

Under the guidelines, which took effect last week, immigration enforcement agencies must ignore the status of most illegal immigrants who reached the U.S. before late 2020.

Mr. Mayorkas said merely finding someone who is in the country illegally is not a good enough reason to enforce immigration laws. Instead, officers and agents must justify an arrest or deportation under one of three categories: national security risk, serious crime or recent border jumping.

Homeland Security said Mr. Mayorkas wrote the rules after personally meeting with employees at U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement in seven major cities. The secretary talked with leaders of three prominent immigration advocacy groups and spoke with domestic violence advocates and "members of the academic community," the department said.

Mr. Mayorkas and his team also "conducted outreach" with government groups, including its own agency executives and employees, senior leaders at other immigration agencies, police and sheriffs groups, and national associations for states, counties, mayors, state legislators, governors and attorneys general.

ICE said it reached out to a long list of interest groups, including the Law Enforcement Immigration Task Force, the Alliance for Immigrant Survivors, the American Constitution Society, the National Immigrant Justice Center, the American Civil Liberties Union, the American Immigration Council, the International Refugee Assistance Project, the National Association for Public Defense, Mothers Against Drunk Driving, the Public Defenders Coalition for Immigrant Justice, Asian Americans Advancing Justice, Black immigrant leaders and Mr. Rosenberg's group, AVIAC.

Almost all of those groups have positions backing more lenient enforcement of immigration law. Only Mr. Rosenberg's group proactively pushes for stiffer enforcement, and he said the department did not reach out.

"Not unless you consider I'm on their mailing list for their press releases," he said.

ICE referred questions to Homeland Security, which said Mr. Rosenberg's organization was part of a July 8 meeting "to discuss enforcement practices."

Lack of input

The Washington Times has reviewed documentation of that July 8 meeting. The meeting's focus was ICE's erasure of an office set up during the Trump administration to serve victims of crimes committed by illegal immigrants, not enforcement practices. At a couple of points late in the meeting, ICE Chief of Staff Timothy Perry did mention the enforcement priorities. He said he had been conducting meetings and the agency would like to "engage" at some point on the priorities with AVIAC.

That engagement never took place, Mr. Rosenberg said.

He provided extensive email communications with ICE, including a request for a follow-up conversation with Mr. Perry, which the agency politely sidestepped.

Homeland Security also said Mr. Mayorkas met with sheriffs organizations on April 8.

Jonathan Thompson, executive director of the National Sheriffs' Association, confirmed an April meeting but said Homeland Security's description of it is off base.

"Clearly, some appointee went too far with their justification of outreach," Mr. Thompson said. "We had no outreach, we had no discussions, no give and take, no input into the enforcement priorities."

Clint McDonald, executive director of the Southwestern Border Sheriff's Coalition, said his group was part of an April 8 meeting, not the April 5 date Homeland Security said. Mr. Mayorkas and Rodney Scott, Border Patrol chief at the time, were present.

Mr. McDonald, a retired sheriff, said the meeting was a chance for sheriffs to give input about the border. The sheriffs also gave Mr. Mayorkas a document with thoughts about action items.

According to a follow-up Zoom meeting, Mr. Mayorkas had not looked at the document as of October, Mr. McDonald said. Mr. Mayorkas released his updated priorities in September.

Mr. Scott, the former Border Patrol chief, backed the sheriffs' recollection of the meeting. He said he remembered the details because it was the only time during his tenure that he had a face-to-face, in-person engagement with Mr. Mayorkas. The topics covered were border enforcement and federal grant funding.

Mr. Scott said he didn't recall Mr. Mayorkas mentioning the enforcement priorities "in any way, shape or form."

The Times asked Homeland Security about the disparities, but the department didn't respond to the follow-up inquiry.

The department also didn't respond to a request for comment on the far higher number of immigrant rights groups consulted during the outreach.

The Washington Times has filed Freedom of Information Act requests for Mr. Mayorkas' schedules and for records of his meetings with ICE employees. The Times requested expedited processing on both requests, but was denied. The Department of Homeland Security has not produced records for either request.

'Just checking the box'

The dissonance in the accounts of Mr. Mayorkas' outreach is more than a matter of veracity.

Federal courts have been asked to scrutinize the Biden administration's arrest and deportation practices, and the way the department went about writing the rules is a key element in whether the policymaking passes muster under the Administrative Procedure Act.

The documents detailing the outreach claims were filed as part of the “administrative record” of Mr. Mayorkas’ decision-making in a lawsuit filed in federal court in Texas.

ICE employees who were part of some of the outreach conversations said Mr. Mayorkas’ final priorities didn’t reflect the input he was getting during town hall meetings. They said approvals took too long and detention space was too constrained for the policies to be workable.

One group not listed as part of the outreach is the National ICE Council, the labor union for deportation officers.

Homeland Security said union representatives were “given the first opportunity to speak” in the town halls with agency employees.

Chris Crane, the council’s president, got feedback from union members about the sessions. If ICE leadership was using the meetings as a chance to go over the priorities, he said, that was news to the participants.

“We’re not aware of any officer in the field that supports these policies that they’ve put forth,” Mr. Crane said. “We don’t think anyone really had the opportunity to provide input to these specific changes. That would typically be something the National ICE Council would do, and that certainly didn’t happen here.

“It’s just absurd,” he added. “It’s just checking the box, that’s all this is.”

Jon Feere, a chief of staff at ICE in the Trump administration, said Mr. Mayorkas seems to have discounted any feedback from rank-and-file employees.

“The subject matter experts at ICE and [U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services] told Mayorkas that these restrictions are undermining their ability to carry out the DHS mission. The USCIS fraud division naturally wants immigration fraud to be a priority, and ICE field office directors understand that giving most illegal aliens a pass is going to encourage more illegal immigration. These are legitimate concerns, and they were completely dismissed by Biden’s political appointees,” Mr. Feere said.

“Mayorkas met with a lot of anti-borders, anti-enforcement organizations, and his ICE enforcement guidelines reflect that. It’s difficult to see any influence from law enforcement or advocates of public safety.”

The Times also reached out to several of the immigration activist groups listed as having been consulted. None of them responded to messages.

Mr. Mayorkas’ Sept. 30 policy replaced a Feb. 18 policy from acting ICE Director Tae Johnson that was the subject of litigation. The February guidance replaced an Inauguration Day policy.

Under Mr. Johnson’s policy, ICE officers averaged an arrest every other month — orders of magnitude lower than in the Trump years. But ICE said the increased number of aggravated felons arrested proved that the narrower focus was helping target the worst actors.

ICE said a typical arrest request from officers was approved in less than 70 minutes, “suggesting that the approval regime does not unduly delay enforcement actions.”

Mr. Feere, now director of investigations at the Center for Immigration Studies, said making an arrest requires effort and paperwork even under optimal circumstances. The new Biden rules make that much tougher.

“DHS is being run by people who fundamentally don’t support its congressionally mandated mission, and that’s a serious problem for our democracy,” he said.

	<p>He said it may be time for Congress to impose an arrest quota on ICE. Homeland Security acknowledged that the sheriffs suggested it.</p> <p>“Congress has given the executive branch a lot of leeway in how it carries out immigration enforcement, but the Biden administration’s extremely limiting policies suggest that Congress may have to mandate an annual minimum number of arrests and removals if our laws are to mean anything. Not surprisingly, sheriffs recommended this type of standard,” Mr. Feere said.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/06 CDC warns: mumps continues to circulate
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/dec/06/cdc-mumps-us-mmr-children
GIST	<p>The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has warned that mumps continues to circulate in the US and that pediatricians should remain vigilant, even though spread remains low.</p> <p>Mumps was nearly eliminated under routine childhood vaccinations, as part of the measles, mumps and rubella vaccine, or MMR. Most doctors have never seen a mumps case, researchers noted.</p> <p>But epidemiologists said doctors should continue to test for mumps, because recent outbreaks have occurred in vaccinated adolescents and some children.</p> <p>“The key takeaway from our report is it is important for all clinicians to suspect mumps in all patients with parotitis or other mumps complications, regardless of a patient’s age, vaccination status or lack of travel outside the US,” said Mariel Marlow, a CDC epidemiologist and head of the agency’s mumps program, in a video for the journal Pediatrics.</p> <p>The prevalence of mumps declined more than 99% since 1967, from more than 150,000 cases per year to about 200 in 2003, after a vaccine for the disease was introduced. In 1977, it became a routine part of childhood immunizations.</p> <p>The median annual number of recent mumps cases is still less than 1% of the figure for 1967, before a vaccine was introduced.</p> <p>However, researchers said there have been two distinct peaks, in 2006 and 2016. Between 85% and 93% of infected children in the outbreaks were fully vaccinated against the disease.</p> <p>That suggests the disease, unlike measles and rubella, is endemic in the US. Some recent research has theorized that vaccine-conferred immunity to mumps may wane by early adulthood.</p> <p>Mumps spreads in ways similar to coronavirus, through respiratory droplets. In 2020 there were just 142 US cases of mumps, compared with a median of 1,328. However, the disease was still widespread geographically, and delays in routine childhood immunization caused by the pandemic could create the conditions for larger mumps outbreaks in the future, researchers said.</p> <p>Mumps is typically mild, and is best known for the swelling it causes in the parotid gland, near the jaw. However, it can result in serious complications such as brain swelling or hearing loss, complications which occur in less than 1% of cases in the post-vaccine era.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/06 Next pandemic more lethal than Covid-19?
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/next-pandemic-could-be-more-lethal-than-covid-oxford-vaccine-creator-says-2021-12-06/

GIST	<p>LONDON, Dec 6 (Reuters) - Future pandemics could be even more lethal than COVID-19 so the lessons learned from the outbreak must not be squandered and the world should ensure it is prepared for the next viral onslaught, one of the creators of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine said.</p> <p>The novel coronavirus has killed 5.26 million people across the world, according to Johns Hopkins University, wiped out trillions of dollars in economic output and turned life upside down for billions of people.</p> <p>"The truth is, the next one could be worse. It could be more contagious, or more lethal, or both," Sarah Gilbert said in the Richard Dimbleby Lecture, the BBC reported. "This will not be the last time a virus threatens our lives and our livelihoods."</p> <p>Gilbert, a professor of vaccinology at the University of Oxford, said the world should make sure it is better prepared for the next virus.</p> <p>"The advances we have made, and the knowledge we have gained, must not be lost," she said.</p> <p>Efforts to end the COVID-19 pandemic have been uneven and fragmented, marked by limited access to vaccines in low-income countries while the "healthy and wealthy" in rich countries get boosters, health experts say.</p> <p>A panel of health experts set up by the World Health Organisation to review the handling of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has called for permanent funding and for greater ability to investigate pandemics through a new treaty.</p> <p>One proposal was for new financing of at least \$10 billion a year for pandemic preparedness.</p> <p>The COVID-19 outbreak was first detected in China in late 2019. Vaccines were developed against the virus in record time.</p> <p>Gilbert said the Omicron variant's spike protein contained mutations known to increase the transmissibility of the virus.</p> <p>"There are additional changes that may mean antibodies induced by the vaccines, or by infection with other variants, may be less effective at preventing infection with Omicron," Gilbert said.</p> <p>"Until we know more, we should be cautious, and take steps to slow down the spread of this new variant."</p>
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HEADLINE	12/06 Ethiopia forces recapture 2 strategic towns
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/ethiopian-forces-have-recaptured-two-strategic-towns-government-says-2021-12-06/
GIST	<p>ADDIS ABABA, Dec 6 (Reuters) - Ethiopian forces have recaptured the strategic towns of Dessie and Kombolcha from rebellious Tigrayan forces, the government said on Monday, the latest sign of the government retaking territory it recently lost.</p> <p>Forces aligned with the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) had taken control of the towns, in the Amhara region, just over a month ago.</p> <p>TPLF spokesperson Getachew Reda did not immediately respond to a request for comment.</p> <p>The government's communication service announced the victory, the latest boost for Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's government. Federal forces and their regional allies last week recaptured the town of Lalibela, a United Nations World Heritage Site, from Tigrayan forces.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/06 Definition 'fully vaccinated' changing?
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/is-it-time-to-change-the-definition-of-fully-vaccinated/
GIST	<p>As more indoor venues require proof of vaccination for entrance and with winter — as well as omicron, a new COVID-19 variant — looming, scientists and public health officials are debating when it will be time to change the definition of “fully vaccinated” to include a booster shot.</p> <p>It’s been more than six months since many Americans finished their vaccination course against COVID-19; statistically, their immunity is waning.</p> <p>At the same time, cases of infections with the omicron variant have been reported in at least 15 states, as of Sunday. Omicron is distinguished by at least 50 mutations, some of which appear to be associated with increased transmissibility. The World Health Organization dubbed it a variant of concern on Nov. 26.</p> <p>The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has recommended that everyone 18 and older get a COVID-19 booster shot, revising its narrower guidance that only people 50 and up “should” get a shot while younger adults could choose whether or not to do so. Scientists assume the additional shots will offer significant protection from the new variant, though they do not know for certain how much.</p> <p>Dr. Anthony Fauci, chief medical adviser to President Joe Biden, during a White House press briefing Wednesday was unequivocal in advising the public. “Get boosted now,” Fauci said, adding urgency to the current federal guidance. About a quarter of U.S. adults have received additional vaccine doses.</p> <p>“The definition of ‘fully vaccinated’ has not changed. That’s, you know, after your second dose of a Pfizer or Moderna vaccine, after your single dose of a Johnson & Johnson vaccine,” said the CDC’s director, Dr. Rochelle Walensky, during Tuesday’s White House briefing on COVID-19.</p> <p>“We are absolutely encouraging those who are eligible for a boost six months after those mRNA doses to get your boost. But we are not changing the definition of ‘fully vaccinated’ right now.” A booster is recommended two months after receiving the J&J shot.</p> <p>But that, she noted, could change: “As that science evolves, we will look at whether we need to update our definition of ‘fully vaccinated.’”</p> <p>Still, the Democratic governors of Connecticut and New Mexico are sending a different signal in their states, as are some countries — such as Israel, which arguably has been the most aggressive nation in its approach. Some scientists point out that many vaccines involve three doses over six months for robust long-term protection, such as the shot against hepatitis. So “fully vaccinated” may need to include shot No. 3 to be considered a full course.</p> <p>“In my view, if you were vaccinated more than six months ago, you’re not fully vaccinated,” Connecticut Gov. Ned Lamont said Nov. 18 during a press briefing. He was encouraging everyone to get boosted at that time, even before the federal government authorized extra shots for everyone.</p> <p>New Mexico Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham had a similar response in mid-November, saying she defined “fully vaccinated” as receiving three shots of the mRNA type. She also opened up booster eligibility to all of her state residents before the CDC and Food and Drug Administration did.</p> <p>What do the varying views on the evolving science mean for vaccine requirements imposed on travelers, or by schools or workplaces? And what about businesses that have required patrons to provide proof of vaccination?</p> <p>Dr. Paul Offit, director of the Vaccine Education Center at the Children’s Hospital of Pennsylvania, said the CDC’s stronger recommendation for everyone to get boosted signals to him that a booster is now part of the vaccine regimen. Yet Offit, who is also a member of the FDA’s vaccine advisory committee, wrote a joint op-ed last week in which he and two other scientists argued that boosters were not yet needed for</p>

everyone and that healthy young people should wait to see whether an omicron-specific booster might be needed.

“I think when the CDC said they are recommending a third dose, they just made the statement that this is a three-dose vaccine series,” Offit told KHN. “And, frankly, I think it’s going to throw a wrench into mandates.”

Yet to be determined is whether restaurants or other places of business will look more closely at vaccine cards for the booster.

Dr. Georges Benjamin, executive director of the American Public Health Association, said it’s too early to say. “For now, businesses should stay focused on current guidelines,” he said.

Dr. Marc Siegel, an associate professor of medicine at the George Washington School of Medicine and Health Sciences, said the question of whether you are fully vaccinated with just two doses or need a booster is a question of semantics. COVID-19 immunity level is the more important issue.

Siegel said he thinks more suitable terminology would be to call someone “appropriately” or “adequately” vaccinated against COVID-19 rather than “fully” vaccinated, since it’s possible that more boosters could be needed in the future — making “full vaccination” a moving target.

But, as with so many aspects of the pandemic, ambiguity prevails — both in federal guidance on the definition of “fully vaccinated” and in entrance policies, which vary by state, school and business.

Right now, businesses don’t appear to be checking for boosters, but that could change. So, it may be wise to first check the requirements — lest patrons present a two-shot vaccine passport, only to be turned away as inadequately protected.

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HEADLINE	12/07 Sawant faces recall vote in Seattle
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/elections-george-floyd-race-and-ethnicity-seattle-recall-elections-c7d064277dc06f28b97b52449005917d
GIST	<p>SEATTLE (AP) — A controversial member of the Seattle City Council – firebrand socialist Kshama Sawant – faces a recall election Tuesday one month after voters chose moderate candidates over progressives in the general election.</p> <p>The recall is seen as a further test of whether the left wing is in retreat in one of the most liberal U.S. cities. Business-friendly candidates won a council seat and the mayor’s office in November.</p> <p>Sawant, 48, an Indian immigrant and an economics professor, is the longest-tenured council member.</p> <p>She has had an outsized influence on the tone and direction of Seattle politics since she launched her political career under the banner of the Socialist Alternative party in 2012, when she ran unsuccessfully for state representative.</p> <p>Sawant was elected to the City Council the following year, and her threat to run a voter initiative drive for an immediate \$15 minimum wage has been credited with pressuring business leaders and then-Mayor Ed Murray to reach a deal raising the wage to \$15 over a few years. Seattle was the first major city in the U.S. to adopt such a measure.</p> <p>But critics have said she offers more rhetoric than substance and that her brash antics are incompatible with good governance.</p> <p>Henry Bridger II is leading the effort to recall Sawant.</p>

“She literally blasts people who don’t agree with her,” Bridger said. “If you’re not in lockstep with her ideology, you become the enemy. You’re called a right-wing Republican. You’re called a racist. You’re bullied and pushed around.”

At stake is how the city approaches homelessness, police reform, taxation and other pressing issues.

Sawant has been pushing for rent control, cutting police funding and expanding taxes on high earners such as Amazon to pay for affordable housing, schools and community services.

But Seattle and other cities are banned by state law from adopting rent control. And last month, a federal appeals court ruled that two Seattle police officers could sue Sawant for defamation after she claimed a fatal shooting they were involved in was “a blatant murder.”

The recall question on the ballot cites a minor campaign finance violation that Sawant acknowledged and for which she paid a fine and her alleged leadership of a protest march to the home of Mayor Jenny Durkan, even though Durkan’s address was protected by a state confidentiality law due to her prior work as a federal prosecutor. The recall question also cites her decision to let a crowd of protesters into City Hall while it was closed due to the pandemic.

Bridger insisted that his motivation for bringing the recall campaign was to hold Sawant accountable and that it has nothing to do with her politics.

But to Sawant’s supporters, the charges are a pretext for an effort by big business, developers and commercial real-estate interests to accomplish what they failed to do in 2019 — when a late, million-dollar push by Amazon to defeat her and other progressive candidates backfired. Sawant was reelected by about 4 percentage points.

Sawant denies having led the march to Durkan’s house, though she did participate in it.

She has defended her decision to let Black Lives Matter demonstrators inside City Hall following George Floyd’s murder by Minneapolis police. She said the protesters were only there for an hour and that it was important for them to be seen in the halls of power.

Bryan Koulouris, spokesman for the Kshama Solidarity Campaign, called the attempt to recall Sawant part of a national backlash against the Black Lives Matter movement.

“From the nature of the charges and from when this election is happening, it begins to scratch the surface of why this is a right-wing recall,” Koulouris said.

The two groups supporting the recall — Recall Sawant and A Better Seattle — have raised close to \$1 million combined, as has Kshama Solidarity.

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HEADLINE	12/06 Kamikaze drones: power, peril to military
SOURCE	https://www.nbcnews.com/news/military/kamikaze-drones-new-weapon-brings-power-peril-u-s-military-n1285415
GIST	<p>DUGWAY PROVING GROUND, Utah — The killer drone whooshed out of its launch tube, spreading its carbon wings and shooting into the sky.</p> <p>Flying too fast for the naked eye to track, the battery-powered robot circled the Utah desert, hunting for the target it had been programmed to strike. Moments later, it sailed through the driver’s side window of an empty pickup truck and exploded in a fireball.</p> <p>“Good hit,” exclaimed an operator from AeroVironment, the company that produces the drone and sells it to the U.S. military.</p>

NBC News traveled to a military testing center for exclusive access to the first public demonstration of the Switchblade 300, a small, low-cost “kamikaze” drone made by AeroVironment, which sources said the U.S. military has used quietly for years in targeted killing operations in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria.

The demonstration told a story of promise and peril.

Americans have become accustomed to images of [Hellfire missiles](#) raining down from Predator and Reaper drones to hit terrorist targets in Pakistan or Yemen. But that was yesterday’s drone war.

A revolution in unmanned aerial vehicles is unfolding, and the U.S. has lost its monopoly on the technology.

Some experts believe the spread of the semi-autonomous weapons will change ground warfare as profoundly as the machine gun did.

They can leapfrog traditional defenses to strike infantry troops anywhere on the battlefield, and they cost just \$6,000 apiece, compared to \$150,000 for the Hellfire missile typically fired by Predator or Reaper drones. That capability could help save the lives of U.S. troops, but it could also put them — and Americans at home — in great danger from terrorists or nation-states that haven’t previously had access to such lethal and affordable technology.

“I think this is going to be the new IED,” or improvised explosive device, said Shaan Shaikh, a missile expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. “It’s something that we can see that is going to be a problem, and we have some defenses, but not enough.”

Dubbed kamikaze, suicide or killer drones, these unmanned aircraft don’t fire missiles — they are the missiles. But unlike typical missiles, they can circle above a target, wait for the ideal moment and strike with incredible precision.

The U.S. military couldn’t have fought the way it did in Iraq or Afghanistan if the enemy had had killer drones. The next battlefield opponent is likely to have them. And terrorists will eventually get them, too — a possibility that has homeland security officials scrambling to find a solution, given that there is no surefire defense against them.

“There are over 100 countries and nonstate groups that have drones today, and the technology is widely proliferating,” said Paul Scharre, a former Army Ranger who is a scholar at the Center for a New American Security and the author of “Army of None,” a book about autonomous weapons. “It levels the playing field between the U.S. and terrorist groups or rebel groups in a way that’s certainly not good for the United States.”

Today’s small lethal drones are difficult to detect on radar, and they can even be programmed to hit targets without human intervention, based on facial recognition or some other computer wizardry. And while the Pentagon and the Department of Homeland Security are spending billions of dollars to come up with “counter drone” technology, experts say there is, as yet, no foolproof version of it.

Taken into battle in a backpack

Weighing just 5½ pounds, including its small warhead, the Switchblade can be taken into battle in a backpack and fly up to 7 miles to hit a target. The 300 model is designed to kill individuals, while a larger version, the 600, can destroy armored vehicles. AeroVironment isn’t yet allowed to show the bigger one to the public.

They are called “Switchblade” because their bladelike wings spring out on launch.

“It allows our warfighter to have a battlefield superiority, which our enemies can't see, can't hear, can't tell it's coming, and really precisely achieve a specific mission effect,” said Wahid Nawabi, AeroVironment’s Afghan-born CEO.

Nawabi said he has been told that the Taliban and others who have been on the receiving end refer to it as an angry bird or a buzzing bee.

Public procurement data show that the Switchblade 300 costs a small fraction of a Hellfire missile’s price tag, let alone the total cost of keeping Reaper drones in the air, flown by pilots in Nevada.

The Switchblade has a feature that allows the operator to adjust the blast radius, so it can kill the driver of a vehicle but not a passenger, for example. The weapon can be “waved off” up to two seconds before impact, AeroVironment says, in the event of a mistake or a risk to civilians.

That wave-off capability is notable in light of the catastrophe in September when the military killed 10 civilians, seven of them children, in a drone strike in Afghanistan that officials now say was a tragic mistake. A Pentagon review found that the strike team was unaware of the presence of children when it decided to fire. Officials said that a child was observed through a video feed of the target area after the launch but that by then the Hellfire missile couldn’t be recalled.

The Switchblade has cameras that show a target seconds before impact. But for a better view of the battlefield, it’s often used in conjunction with a small surveillance drone.

For the NBC News demonstration, AeroVironment used the Puma, which is launched by hand like a large model airplane and provides high-resolution color imagery of the ground. The images beamed back from the Puma’s cameras made it clear that an operator could see the expression on the face of a target in the seconds before the Switchblade struck.

Portable drones provide air support to small ground force units even when overhead assets — fighter jets, helicopters, larger drones — aren’t available, Scharre said.

“The ability to have something that's small and tube-launched that's in your backpack, that the squad leader has access to, that they don't have to get on the radio and call in close air support ... that is a real game changer from a military capability standpoint,” he said.

It’s a game changer not just for the U.S.

The Switchblade may be the most advanced of the genre, but Russia, China, Israel, Iran and Turkey all have some version of a killer drone. Iranian-backed militias have [used small drones](#) in 10 attacks this year on U.S. bases in Iraq, the military says. No U.S. personnel have been hurt or killed, but it is only the beginning.

The tiny country of Azerbaijan used small Turkish-made drones to devastating effect against the Armenian military last year, bringing a decisive end to a stalemate over a disputed enclave that had gone on for years.

[Video released by Azerbaijan](#) shows the drones pummeling artillery, tank and troop emplacements surrounded by trenches that offered no protection whatsoever from the fiery death raining down from above.

Russia and Ukraine have used armed drones in [fighting over a disputed region](#), and Iranian-backed Houthi rebels [used them to blow up Saudi oil facilities](#) in 2019.

Drones, Scharre and other experts say, may usher in the largest transformation of ground war tactics since the [advent of the machine gun](#) at the turn of the 20th century, which quickly put an end to sending large formations of troops marching into gunfire.

Drones “are making the battlefield a much more dangerous place for ground troops,” Scharre said. “Now, hiding behind a wall, hiding in a trench line, is not enough to protect you from the enemy.”

U.S. troops in Iraq are experiencing that danger firsthand. Iranian-backed militias have used small drones in nine attacks on U.S. facilities in Iraq this year, a U.S. military spokesman said. No one has been hurt or killed, but it’s only a matter of time.

A suicide drone attack on an oil tanker linked to an Israeli billionaire killed two crew members off Oman in the Arabian Sea on July 29.

“We have found that every time we come up with some way to defend ourselves against [drones], the technology rapidly advances to the point where it defeats our defensive capabilities,” said Michael Patrick “Mick” Mulroy, a retired Marine and former CIA officer who was deputy assistant secretary of defense for the Middle East from 2017 to 2019.

Mulroy, an ABC News analyst, said that drone defenses include electronic jamming and various methods to shoot them down but that there are technologies and tactics to bypass every possible defense.

The military, for example, can sometimes shoot high-powered weapons at incoming drones on a battlefield.

Inside populated areas, however, small, explosives-laden unmanned aerial vehicles pose a more vexing problem.

In a war zone, “you could do more things with electronic warfare ... with using high-powered microwaves that might be very disruptive in a domestic context,” Scharre said. “You could shoot bullets on the sky in a war zone, and you might be less concerned about where they’re going land out in the desert than in a major American city.”

Meanwhile, all the barriers put up in cities to keep truck bombs away from buildings are useless against drones.

So far, no terrorist group is known to have used a suicide drone. But experts believe it’s only a matter of time. The Islamic State terrorist group put explosives on [hobbyist drones](#) and used them to harass and occasionally injure coalition forces in Iraq and Syria.

The specter of a swarm of explosives-packed drones buzzing toward a crowded U.S. sports arena keeps homeland security officials up at night.

But the government has been slow to react. It was only in 2018 that Congress granted the Department of Homeland Security and other law enforcement agencies the authority to take down drones deemed to be threats inside the U.S.

Since then, DHS has been contracting with outside companies and testing technologies to defeat the drone threat.

A spokesman declined to comment when asked for an update from DHS’ Science and Technology Directorate on the state of domestic counter-drone programs.

In an [article](#) on DHS’ website in July, the agency discusses some of its counter-drone efforts and notes that tests have been conducted. But the article doesn’t say whether the tests showed that any of the technology works consistently.

In 2018, the head of DHS’ intelligence division at the time told Congress that drones posed a major threat.

	“Commercially available drones can be employed by terrorists and criminals to deliver explosives or harmful substances, conduct surveillance both domestically and internationally against U.S. citizens, interests and assets,” said the official, David Glawe. “This threat is significant, and it's imminent, and it's upon us.”
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HEADLINE	12/07 China pumps \$188B into economy
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/07/economy/china-policy-economy-real-estate-intl-hnk/index.html
GIST	<p>Hong Kong (CNN Business)China has decided it's time to loosen its purse strings and pump money into the economy in a bid to stave off threats to the recovery.</p> <p>The People's Bank of China on Monday said it would cut the reserve requirement ratio for most banks by half a percentage point, starting December 15. That move, which reduces the amount of money that banks have to keep in reserve, will unleash some 1.2 trillion yuan (\$188 billion) for business and household loans.</p> <p>The decision — the second cut to that ratio this year — came on the same day China's Politburo signaled that it may take more aggressive actions to protect the economy in 2022. The Chinese Communist Party's leadership team, chaired by President Xi Jinping, said in a statement that "ensuring stability" would be a top priority in the coming year.</p> <p>The statement was notable for its use of the phrase "stability is the top priority" — the first time the Politburo has used those words at its December meeting, which is dedicated to discussing the year ahead, according to Larry Hu, head of China economics for Macquarie Group.</p> <p>"In other words, top leaders are deeply concerned about the risk of potential instability," he added in a Monday research note.</p> <p>Beijing has been very cautious about intervening in China's economic recovery during the coronavirus pandemic. It hasn't cut the country's benchmark lending rate since early 2020, and has refrained from flooding the economy with stimulus — instead offering more targeted support to smaller businesses that have been hit by the pandemic.</p> <p>The world's second largest economy outperformed other big nations during the pandemic, and was the only major global economy to grow last year.</p> <p>But China has faced a slew of challenges to growth in 2021, including a power shortage, shipping delays and a crisis in real estate. Analysts have also been worried about the effects of the country's massive crackdown on tech firms and other private companies.</p> <p>Hu noted that during the Politburo's meeting last December, the leadership signaled that they would be tightening regulations on private businesses — policies that dominated headlines in 2022.</p> <p>"This time, the Politburo meeting suggests that the priority has shifted from regulatory tightening to supporting growth," he added.</p> <p>The real estate crisis perhaps looms largest for China. Evergrande — one of the country's largest and most indebted developers — has been teetering on the brink of default for months. On Friday, it warned that it may not have enough money to meet its financial obligations, an announcement that caused shares to plummet 20% in Hong Kong on Monday.</p> <p>Analysts have long feared that Evergrande's collapse could have ripple effects across the property sector in China, which accounts for as much as 30% of GDP.</p>

	<p>Prior to Monday's Politburo statement, Beijing had been pretty firm in cracking down on what it saw as excessive borrowing and unruly activity in the property sector. Xi in 2017 famously announced that "housing is for living and not for speculation" — a statement that has appears to have driven policy in China for years.</p> <p>But analysts from Citi noted Tuesday that the Politburo shied away from repeating that edict this week, and instead stressed that the country will need to support "reasonable housing demand" in the future. That, along with the central bank's ratio cut, "sends a signal that policy will turn more accommodative on property," they wrote in a research note.</p> <p>Chinese stocks improved Tuesday after the moves. Hong Kong's Hang Seng Index (HSI) advanced 2.7%, recovering losses after a drop of 1.8% Monday as property and tech stocks were routed. China's Shanghai Composite (SHCOMP) closed up 0.2%.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/07 China threatens US over Olympics boycott
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/07/china/china-response-us-olympic-boycott-intl-hnk/index.html
GIST	<p>Hong Kong (CNN)China has threatened the Biden administration with retaliation over its decision to impose a diplomatic boycott of the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing, warning the move could harm bilateral relations.</p> <p>The Biden administration said Monday it would not send an official United States delegation to the Beijing Winter Games as a statement against China's "ongoing genocide and crimes against humanity in Xinjiang." US athletes will still be allowed to compete in the Games.</p> <p>Responding to the White House announcement, China's Foreign Ministry said it had launched "solemn representation" with the US and vowed to take "resolute countermeasures."</p> <p>"Out of ideological bias and based on lies and rumors, the US is trying to disrupt the Beijing Winter Olympics. This will only expose its sinister intention and further erode its moral authority and credibility," ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian said at a news conference Tuesday.</p> <p>"The wrong move of the US has undermined the foundation and atmosphere for China-US sports exchanges and Olympic cooperation. It has shot itself in the foot. The US should understand the grave consequences of its move," Zhao said.</p> <p>Relations between the two superpowers had recently begun to improve, following last month's virtual summit between US President Joe Biden and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping.</p> <p>While the meeting yielded no significant breakthroughs, it allowed for a return to a more constructive, stable relationship, following a near total breakdown during the final year of the Trump administration and continued hostility into the Biden administration.</p> <p>Beijing has offered no clue as to what countermeasures it is considering, but the possibility of further retaliation now threatens to once again derail bilateral relations.</p> <p>Compared to the angry response of the Chinese Foreign Ministry, some Chinese diplomats and state media employees have offered a more nonchalant take on Twitter -- which is blocked in China -- stressing US politicians had not yet been invited to the Games.</p> <p>"Politicians calling for boycott #2022BeijingOlympics are doing so for their own political interests and posturing. In fact, no one would care about whether these people come or not, and it has no impact whatsoever on the #Beijing2022 to be successfully held," tweeted Liu Pengyu, spokesperson of the Chinese Embassy in the US.</p>

Hu Xijin, editor-in-chief of the nationalist tabloid Global Times, also weighed in.

"Why the fuss? If US officials don't come, let it be. China didn't invite them anyway." he [tweeted](#). "Only super narcissistic people will regard their absence as a powerful boycott. Most of those US govt officials are close contacts of the Covid-19 patients according to China's standard, moreover picky and pretentious. You are the people that Beijing residents least want to see."

While Beijing might not be too concerned about the absence of American politicians, it could turn into a bigger headache if the US move is joined by more countries. Previously, the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia have all said they were considering a diplomatic boycott.

Activists have long called for a boycott of the Beijing Games in protest of China's human rights abuses in Xinjiang and Tibet, and its political crackdown on Hong Kong. Over the past month, Beijing's silencing of Chinese tennis star Peng Shuai's sexual assault allegations against a former Chinese leader has further amplified such calls.

The US diplomatic boycott has been welcomed by rights groups. Human Rights Watch called it a "crucial step toward challenging the Chinese government's crimes against humanity targeting Uyghurs and other Turkic communities."

"But this shouldn't be the only action. The US should now redouble efforts with like-minded governments to investigate and map out pathways to accountability for those responsible for these crimes and justice for the survivors," Sophie Richardson, China director at Human Rights Watch, said in a statement.

The potential snowball effect is clearly on the mind of some Chinese diplomats. The Chinese mission to the United Nations, for instance, has called the US move a reflection of "its mentality of the Cold War."

"The US just wants to politicize sports, create divisions and provoke confrontation. This approach will find no support and is doomed to fail. It will only make them more isolated and stand in opposition to the trend of the times and to the vast majority of countries and people around the world," the mission's spokesperson Zhu Zhiqiang said in a statement.

Washington's response to the Beijing Winter Games stands in stark contrast to its approach to the Beijing Summer Olympics 13 years ago, when the Chinese government faced fierce criticism and protests against its crackdown on Tibet.

In 2008, then-President George W. Bush attended the Olympic opening ceremony and cheered for American athletes during the Games. His father, former President George H.W. Bush, also attended the Games as the honorary captain of the US team.

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HEADLINE	12/06 Spain PM urges Christmas caution
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/spain-pm-urges-christmas-caution-hospital-staff-infected-81585837
GIST	<p>MADRID -- Spain's prime minister on Monday urged people to "remain prudent" about COVID-19 over the holidays, as Christmas festivities at one Spanish hospital are suspected of infecting dozens of staff.</p> <p>Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez told reporters that Spaniards can't "let their guard down" because the coronavirus continues to spread, despite fewer cases and fewer difficulties for the health service than this time last year.</p> <p>The regional hospital of Malaga, a city on Spain's southern coast, said 170 staff attended a Christmas dinner in a restaurant last weekend. Since then, 68 staff, including intensive care nurses and doctors, have tested positive for COVID-19.</p>

	<p>The staff took antigen tests before the event and were negative, which is making authorities question whether the dinner gathering was the cause of the outbreak, Spanish private news agency Europa Press reported.</p> <p>The infected staff were all fully vaccinated and are showing no symptoms, Europa Press said, citing unidentified hospital sources.</p> <p>The Andalucia province, where Malaga is located, has recently witnessed a rise in cases. Its 14-day infection rate stands at 136 cases per 100,000 inhabitants.</p> <p>In Spain as a whole, that rate stood at 248 last Friday.</p> <p>Authorities are also mindful of the new omicron variant, with 10 cases reported nationwide, though the scale of the threat from it isn't yet clear.</p> <p>The regional government of the Balearic Islands in the Mediterranean, which includes Mallorca, announced Monday it had detected four new omicron cases. It found two other cases last week.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/06 Cruise ship w/infections: new passengers
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/cruise-ship-covid-19-infections-passengers-81588974
GIST	<p>NEW ORLEANS -- A cruise ship that carried at least 17 passengers and crew members with breakthrough COVID-19 infections when it docked in New Orleans has set sail again with new passengers.</p> <p>Nine crew members and eight passengers were infected when the Norwegian Breakaway arrived on Sunday, a Louisiana Department of Health spokeswoman said Monday.</p> <p>None had any symptoms and only fully vaccinated people are allowed on board, Norwegian Cruise Line said.</p> <p>The cruise line said all passengers who boarded the Norwegian Breakaway on Sunday were offered a chance to cancel without penalty. The company did not immediately respond to questions about whether any did cancel or how many passengers the ship now carries.</p> <p>"Guests who opt to sail must wear masks while indoors except while actively eating or drinking and will be tested twice during the cruise," the statement said.</p> <p>The Breakaway can carry up to 3,963 passengers. Its Caribbean route from New Orleans includes Cozumel and Costa Maya in Mexico; Roatán, in the Bay Islands of Honduras; and Harvest Caye, Belize.</p> <p>An earlier statement from Norwegian Cruise Line said that any passengers who tested positive would either drive themselves home or "self-isolate in accommodations provided by the company."</p> <p>Some people who left the ship on Sunday told WVUE-TV that they had been told that people on board had tested positive for COVID-19, but others said they hadn't.</p> <p>Don Canole of North Carolina said he got first word from overhearing the station's interview with someone nearby. "It would have been nice to have known. We would have taken maybe a few more precautions," he said.</p> <p>Passengers said they were tested for COVID-19 exposure on Saturday. The cruise line also gave passengers take-home rapid tests as they left the ship, according to WVUE.</p> <p>Cruise ships were an early source of outbreaks at the start of the coronavirus pandemic last year, and some ships were rejected at ports and passengers were forced into quarantine. The CDC issued a no-sail order in</p>

	March 2020, prompting a standstill that ended last June as cruise ships began to leave U.S. ports with new health and safety requirements.
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HEADLINE	12/06 High costs of extreme heat in Phoenix
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Technology/wireStory/study-outlines-high-costs-extreme-heat-phoenix-81593440
GIST	<p>PHOENIX -- Extreme heat is expensive.</p> <p>That's the conclusion of a study presented Monday by The Nature Conservancy, which commissioned a look at the costs of rising temperatures in Phoenix.</p> <p>Working with infrastructure consulting firm AECOM, the nonprofit environmental organization known for its nature preserves and efforts to protect biodiversity this time turned its attention to the country's hottest large metropolitan area.</p> <p>“As Phoenix continues to urbanize and its population expands, the benefits of adapting to extreme heat may only increase, as will the consequences of inaction,” the report said. “To implement the ambitious solution scenarios and realize the associated benefits, both the public and private sector will need to play an active role.”</p> <p>David Hondula, a climate scientist formerly with Arizona State University who now heads Phoenix’s new heat response and mitigation office, said the report will be useful for cities like his in getting funding for measures to help cool down neighborhoods. He served on the study’s advisory committee.</p> <p>Phoenix was always scorching, but climate change has made it even hotter, with temperatures in early September still climbing to 111 degrees (43.8 Celsius). Temperatures reached as high as 118 degrees (48 Celsius) over the summer. The city is the nation’s fifth largest, with 1.6 million people.</p> <p>The people most vulnerable to the heat are often in poor and racially diverse communities where many households lack the means to cope with heat waves that are becoming more frequent, widespread and severe. Phoenix’s Maricopa County recorded 323 heat related deaths in 2020,</p> <p>The Nature Conservancy’s study looked at the costs that can be caused by steadily rising temperatures to human health, labor productivity, electricity and roadways.</p> <p>Extreme heat already costs people in metro Phoenix \$7.3 million every year in emergency room visits and hospitalizations due to heat-related illnesses, according to the study. Maintaining roadways in the metro area costs transportation agencies over \$100 million annually as streets and highways buckle, rut and crack from high temperatures.</p> <p>The study concluded planting enough trees to provide canopy for a quarter of the desert city and covering all of the area’s buildings with “cool roofs” made of materials that don’t absorb heat could help the city save billions of dollars over the next three decades.</p> <p>It said installing cool roofs on just a third of the structures in the Phoenix metro area could help save as much as \$280 million annually in avoidable losses from decreased labor productivity, increased energy needs and heat-related illnesses and deaths.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/06 Omicron vs. delta: battle of mutations
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Technology/wireStory/omicron-delta-battle-coronavirus-mutants-critical-81592353
GIST	<p>As the omicron coronavirus variant spreads in southern Africa and pops up in countries all around the world, scientists are anxiously watching a battle play out that could determine the future of the pandemic. Can the latest competitor to the world-dominating delta overthrow it?</p>

Some scientists, poring over data from South Africa and the United Kingdom, suggest omicron could emerge the victor.

“It’s still early days, but increasingly, data is starting to trickle in, suggesting that omicron is likely to outcompete delta in many, if not all, places,” said Dr. Jacob Lemieux, who monitors variants for a research collaboration led by Harvard Medical School.

But others said Monday it’s too soon to know how likely it is that omicron will spread more efficiently than delta, or, if it does, how fast it might take over.

“Especially here in the U.S., where we’re seeing significant surges in delta, whether omicron’s going to replace it I think we’ll know in about two weeks,” said Matthew Binnicker, director of clinical virology at Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota.

Many critical questions about omicron remain unanswered, including whether the virus causes milder or more severe illness and how much it might evade immunity from past COVID-19 illness or vaccines.

On the issue of spread, scientists point to what’s happening in South Africa, where omicron was first detected. Omicron’s speed in infecting people and achieving near dominance in South Africa has health experts worried that the country is at the start of a new wave that may come to overwhelm hospitals.

The new variant rapidly moved South Africa from a period of low transmission, averaging less than 200 new cases per day in mid-November, to more than 16,000 per day over the weekend. Omicron accounts for more than 90% of the new cases in Gauteng province, the epicenter of the new wave, according to experts. The new variant is rapidly spreading and achieving dominance in South Africa’s eight other provinces.

“The virus is spreading extraordinarily fast,” said Willem Hanekom, director of the Africa Health Research Institute. “If you look at the slopes of this wave that we’re in at the moment, it’s a much steeper slope than the first three waves that South Africa experienced. This indicates that it’s spreading fast and it may therefore be a very transmissible virus.”

But Hanekom, who is also co-chair the South African COVID-19 Variants Research Consortium, said South Africa had such low numbers of delta cases when omicron emerged, “I don’t think we can say” it out-competed delta.

Scientists say it’s unclear whether omicron will behave the same way in other countries as it has in South Africa. Lemieux said there are already some hints about how it may behave; in places like the United Kingdom, which does a lot of genomic sequencing, he said, “we’re seeing what appears to be a signal of exponential increase of omicron over delta.”

In the United States, as in the rest of the world, “there’s still a lot of uncertainty,” he said. “But when you put the early data together, you start to see a consistent picture emerge: that omicron is already here, and based on what we’ve observed in South Africa, it’s likely to become the dominant strain in the coming weeks and months and will likely cause a surge in case numbers.”

What that could mean for public health remains to be seen. Hanekom said early data from South Africa shows that reinfection rates are much higher with omicron than previous variants, suggesting the virus is escaping immunity somewhat. It also shows the virus seems to be infecting younger people, mostly those who are unvaccinated, and most cases in hospitals have been relatively mild.

But Binnicker said things could play out differently in other parts of the world or in different groups of patients. “It’ll be really interesting to see what happens when more infections potentially occur in older adults or those with underlying health conditions,” he said. “What’s the outcome in those patients?”

As the world waits for answers, scientists suggest people do all they can to protect themselves.

	<p>“We want to make sure that people have as much immunity from vaccination as possible. So if people are not vaccinated they should get vaccinated,” Lemieux said. “If people are eligible for boosters, they should get boosters, and then do all the other things that we know are effective for reducing transmission -- masking and social distancing and avoiding large indoor gatherings, particularly without masks.”</p>
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HEADLINE	12/06 Syria: Israel warplanes strike city's port
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/syria-israeli-warplanes-attacked-latakia-port-81593751
GIST	<p>DAMASCUS, Syria -- Israeli warplanes fired missiles that struck the port of Latakia early on Tuesday, hitting containers and igniting a huge fire, Syrian state media said.</p> <p>It was a rare attack on the city's port, a vital facility where much of Syria's imports are brought into the war-torn country.</p> <p>Syria's state media quoted an unnamed military official as saying that several missiles struck the containers area in the port, setting some of them on fire. There were no casualties from the airstrike, according to the official, who gave no further details.</p> <p>Syrian state TV reported that five explosions were heard in the port. A huge fire erupted in the containers area, and fire engines rushed to the port.</p> <p>There was no comment from the Israeli military, which has conducted hundreds of airstrikes on targets inside government-controlled parts of Syria over the course of its 10 year civil war, but rarely acknowledges or discusses such operations.</p> <p>Some of the strikes in the past had targeted the main airport in the Syrian capital, Damascus.</p> <p>Israel has acknowledged, however, that it targets the bases of Iran-allied militias, such as Lebanon's militant Hezbollah group that has fighters deployed in Syria. It says it attacks arms shipments believed to be bound for the militias.</p> <p>Hezbollah is fighting on the side of Syrian President Bashar Assad's forces in the war, which started after a military crackdown on Arab Spring-inspired protests calling for his ouster.</p> <p>Israel says Iranian presence on its northern frontier is a red line, justifying its strikes on facilities and weapons inside Syria.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/06 Desperation: Afghans stream into Iran
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/desperation-drives-thousands-afghans-day-borders-81598623
GIST	<p>HERAT, Afghanistan -- Over the course of an hour on a recent night, the bus waiting in the Herat station filled with passengers. Mostly young men, they had no luggage, just the clothes on their backs, maybe a bag with some bread and water for the long road ahead of them.</p> <p>That road is leading them to Iran.</p> <p>Every day, multiple buses rumble out of Afghanistan's western city of Herat, carrying hundreds of people to the border. There they disembark, connect with their smugglers and trek for days, sometimes crammed into pickup trucks bumping through wastelands, sometimes on foot through treacherous mountains in the darkness, eluding guards and thieves.</p> <p>Once in Iran, most will stay there to look for work. But a few hope to go farther.</p>

“We’re going to get to Europe,” said Haroun, a 20-year-old sitting in the bus next to his friend Fuad. Back in their village there is no work. “We have no choice, the economy here is a wreck. Even if it means our death on the way, we accept that.”

Afghans are streaming across the border into Iran in accelerating numbers, driven by desperation. Since the Taliban takeover in mid-August, Afghanistan’s economic collapse has accelerated, robbing millions of work and leaving them unable to feed their families. In the past three months, more than 300,000 people have crossed illegally into Iran, according to the Norwegian Refugee Council, and more are coming at the rate of 4,000 to 5,000 a day.

The European Union is now bracing for a potential swell in Afghans trying to reach its shores at a time when EU nations are determined to lock down against migrants in general.

So far, a post-Taliban surge of Afghan migrants to Europe hasn’t materialized. Afghan entries into the EU have “remained mostly stable,” according to an EU weekly migration report from Nov. 21. The report noted that some Afghans who arrived in Italy from Turkey in November told authorities they had fled their country after the Taliban takeover.

But a significant portion of migrants likely intend to stay in Iran, which is struggling to shut its doors. It already hosts more than 3 million Afghans who fled their homeland during the past decades of turmoil.

Iran is stepping up deportations, sending 20,000 or 30,000 Afghans back every week. This year, Iran deported more than 1.1 million Afghans as of Nov. 21 — 30% higher than the total in all of 2020, according to the International Organization for Migration. Those deported often try again, over and over.

In Afghanistan, the exodus has emptied some villages of their men. In Jar-e Sawz, a village north of Herat visited by The Associated Press, an elderly man was the only male left after all the younger men left.

One smuggler in Herat — a woman involved in the business for two decades — said that before the Taliban takeover, she was transporting 50 or 60 people a week into Iran, almost all single men. Since the August takeover, she moves around 300 people a week, including women and children.

“The country is destroyed so people have to leave,” she said, speaking on condition she not be named because of her work. “I feel like I’m doing the right thing. If some poor person asks me, I can’t refuse them. I ask God to help me help them.”

She charges the equivalent of almost \$400 per person, but only about \$16 up front, with the rest paid after the migrant finds work. The pay-later system is common in Herat, a sign that there are so many migrants, smugglers can accept some risk that some will be unable to pay. Along the way, smugglers pass out bribes to Taliban, Pakistani and Iranian border guards to turn a blind eye, she said.

Everyone going gives the same reason.

“There is nothing here. There is no work and our families are hungry,” said Naib, a 20-year-old who was pausing with a group of migrants one night in a desolate area within sight of the Iranian border outside Herat. “We go crawling if we have to. There is no other choice.”

Afghanistan was already one of the poorest countries in the world before the Taliban takeover, and the economy has deteriorated the past year, worsened by the coronavirus pandemic and a punishing drought since late 2020.

When the Taliban came to power on Aug. 15, the main artery keeping Afghanistan’s economy alive — international donor funds — was severed. With the Taliban government unable to pay salaries, hundreds of thousands of state employees found themselves with no livelihoods. With funding for projects gone, many jobs vanished across the labor market.

Farid Ahmed, a 22-year-old in Herat, used to go to a main square each day to be hired by building contractors for a day's work. Previously, he found work most days. "Now we wait all day and no one comes to hire us," he said.

So last month, he took his wife and their two young daughters — ages 8 months and 2 years — across the border. From a relative already there, he heard that a Tehran weaving factory had jobs for him and his wife.

The crossing was a nightmare, he said. They had to walk for three hours in the darkness with several hundred other people across the border. In the cold and darkness, his daughters were crying. Once in Iran, they were almost immediately caught by police and deported.

Back home, nothing has changed. He goes to the square every day but finds no work, he said. So he will try taking his family again. "After winter," he said. "It's too cold now for the children to cross."

Herat, Afghanistan's third largest city, is a main hub for Afghans from other parts of the country making their way to Iran.

The city is only about an hour's drive from the Iranian border, but the frontier is too heavily patrolled here. Instead, migrants embark on a 300-mile (480-kilometer) trip south to Nimrooz, a remote region of deserts and mountains that is Afghanistan's most sparsely populated province. Here, the migrants cross into a corner of Pakistan, from where they can more easily slip into Iran.

It's an arduous journey. Reza Rezaie, a Herat resident, made the trip with his 17-year-old son. The most harrowing moment comes at the Iranian-Pakistani border, where migrants must ascend and then descend Moshkelghar, literally "Difficult Mountain," on narrow trails along steep drop-offs.

"It's pitch darkness and you can't turn on flashlights for security," he recalled. On the way up, they walk in single file, each holding the scarf of the person in front of them. Descending on the Iranian side, they gingerly crawl down so they don't tumble off the edge. "If you fall, no one will help you because they will fall too," he said.

At one point in Iran, he and others hid in the luggage compartment under a bus to get around checkpoints. He worked for a few weeks doing construction in Shiraz before he was caught in a police raid and expelled.

But he is undaunted. His father recently died, so he has to wait for the 40-day mourning period to end. Then he'll try Iran again.

"What else can I do? Here, there is nothing," he said.

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HEADLINE	12/06 Roots behind Russia-Ukraine standoff
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/explainer-russia-ukraine-tensions-81599292
GIST	<p>MOSCOW -- Ukrainian and Western officials are worried that a Russian military buildup near Ukraine could signal plans by Moscow to invade its ex-Soviet neighbor.</p> <p>The Kremlin insists it has no such intention and has accused Ukraine and its Western backers of making the claims to cover up their own allegedly aggressive designs.</p> <p>It's unclear whether the Russian troop concentration heralds an imminent attack. Russian President Vladimir Putin has pushed for Western guarantees precluding NATO's expansion to Ukraine, and the buildup could reflect an attempt to back up the message.</p> <p>Here is a look at the current tensions:</p>

WHAT ARE THE ROOTS OF THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE STANDOFF?

Russia annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula in 2014 after the country's Moscow-friendly president was driven from power by mass protests. Weeks later, Russia threw its weight behind a separatist insurgency that broke out in Ukraine's east.

Ukraine and the West accused Russia of sending its troops and weapons to back the rebels. Moscow denied that, charging that Russians who joined the separatists were volunteers.

More than 14,000 people have died in the fighting that devastated Ukraine's eastern industrial heartland known as Donbas.

A 2015 peace agreement brokered by France and Germany helped end large-scale battles, but efforts to reach a political settlement have failed, and sporadic skirmishes have continued along the tense line of contact.

Earlier this year, a spike in cease-fire violations in the east and a Russian troop concentration near Ukraine fueled war fears, but tensions abated when Moscow pulled back the bulk of its forces after maneuvers in April.

THE LATEST RUSSIAN MILITARY BUILDUP

U.S. intelligence officials last week determined that Russia is planning to deploy an estimated 175,000 troops and almost half of them are already stationed along various points near Ukraine's border in preparation for a possible invasion that could begin as soon as early 2022.

Ukraine has complained that Moscow has kept over 90,000 troops not far from the two countries' border following massive war games in western Russia in the fall.

The Ukrainian Defense Ministry said units of the Russian 41st army have remained near Yelnya, a town about 260 kilometers (160 miles) north of the Ukrainian border.

Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov told lawmakers Friday that the number of Russian troops near Ukraine and in Russian-annexed Crimea is estimated at 94,300, warning that a "large-scale escalation" is possible in January.

Additionally, the commander-in-chief of the Ukrainian armed forces says Russia has about 2,100 military personnel in Ukraine's rebel-controlled east and that Russian officers hold all commanding positions in the separatist forces. Moscow has repeatedly denied the presence of its troops in eastern Ukraine.

Russia hasn't provided any details about its troop numbers and locations, saying that their deployment on its own territory shouldn't concern anyone.

WHAT DOES MOSCOW WANT?

The Kremlin has accused Ukraine of failing to honor the 2015 peace deal and criticized the West for failing to encourage Ukrainian compliance. The agreement was a diplomatic coup for Moscow, requiring Ukraine to grant broad autonomy to the rebel regions and offer a sweeping amnesty to the rebels.

Ukraine, in turn, has pointed to cease-fire violations by Russia-backed separatists and insists there is a continuing Russian troop presence in the rebel east despite the Kremlin's denials.

Amid the recriminations, Russia has rejected a four-way meeting with Ukraine, France and Germany, saying it's useless in view of Ukraine's refusal to abide by the 2015 agreement.

Moscow has strongly criticized the U.S. and its NATO allies for providing Ukraine with weapons and holding joint drills, saying that encourages Ukrainian hawks to try to regain the rebel-held areas by force.

Earlier this year, Putin ominously said a military attempt by Ukraine to reclaim the east would have “grave consequences for Ukrainian statehood.”

Putin has strongly emphasized that Ukraine's aspirations to join NATO represent a red line for Moscow, and also expressed concern about plans by some NATO members to set up military training centers in Ukraine. He said that would give them a military foothold there even without Ukraine joining NATO.

Last week, Putin emphasized that Russia will seek “reliable and long-term security guarantees” from the U.S. and its allies “that would exclude any further NATO moves eastward and the deployment of weapons systems that threaten us in close vicinity to Russian territory.”

He charged that “the threats are mounting on our western border,” with NATO placing its military infrastructure closer to Russia and offered the West to engage in substantive talks on the issue, adding that Moscow would need not just verbal assurances, but “legal guarantees.”

Putin's foreign affairs advisor, Yuri Ushakov, said the Russian leader will push for these guarantees in a video call with U.S. President Joe Biden set for Tuesday, but numerous former U.S. and NATO diplomats say any such Russian demand to Biden would be a nonstarter. Biden himself said Friday that he doesn't “accept anyone's red line.”

IS THE THREAT OF A RUSSIAN INVASION REAL?

Russia rejected talk of an invasion plot as a Western smear campaign and charged the claims could conceal a Ukrainian intention for an attack in the east. Ukraine denies such plans.

Some observers interpret the troop buildup as a demonstration by Putin that Russia is prepared to raise the stakes to convince NATO to respect Moscow's red lines and stop sending troops and weapons to Ukraine.

Last month, Putin noted with satisfaction that Moscow's warnings finally have some traction and caused a “certain stress” in the West. He added: “It's necessary to keep them in that condition for as long as possible so that it doesn't occur to them to stage some conflict on our western borders that we don't need.”

U.S. officials conceded that Moscow's intentions are unclear, but pointed to Russia's past behavior as a cause for concern.

Biden pledged Friday to make it “very, very difficult” for Putin to attack Ukraine, saying that a set of new initiatives coming from his administration are intended to deter Russian aggression.

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Cyber Awareness

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HEADLINE	12/06 Caution: QR codes can lead to scammer
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/use-caution-with-qr-codes-they-can-lead-you-right-scammer/2Y6ARAUHH5FQXIVZDZTFC5RADY/
GIST	SEATTLE — If you haven't heard of QR codes, you've probably seen them. Little black and white boxes you scan with your camera, your phone interprets, and then everything from menus to deals pop right up on your device via the internet. And they're everywhere now.

“Yeah. And they’re a cool technology. And that means they’re subject to abuse, like all the cool technologies, right?” says our cyber security expert, Tim Helming.

Tim Helming is with Seattle-based firm DomainTools and has 20 years of experience in information security. He says scammers are always learning new tricks - and they’re now in the game, turning QR codes into your misery.

“It could be that they are making a fraudulent payment. It could be that they are downloading malware onto your phone,” says Helming. “So, any of those things - if you think about anything that an attacker could do through a malicious link to a phone, they can do the exact same thing through a QR Code.”

The other issue at play is that a person can hover your mouse over a link to check if a web address is legitimate, before you click. A QR code doesn’t give consumers that chance.

“You have fewer ways to validate what it is that you’re about to get to,” says Helming, “than you do if it’s an actual link.”

The BBB scam tracker shows one person last month lost more than \$65,000 in a scam that used QR codes.

So, Tim says consumers need to consider the source before pointing and clicking.

“If I saw a QR code that was slapped up on a telephone pole or the side of a building or something like that, I don’t care how tempting the offer sounds, I am running away from that thing. Nothing to do with it,” says Helming.

We went around Seattle and we literally saw just that.

QR codes do not have to go through any type of vetting before they’re provided. I got on the internet and found a number of websites that offer QR codes for free. Just pop on the site, enter the website you want the code to send people to, and you’re good to go.

Tim says to imagine the ease with which a scammer could make this happen and download malware onto a phone.

“It could be a credential-harvesting kind of thing where they want you to enter log-in information and then they have your username and password for some major account,” says Helming. “Worst-case scenario is the same as any kind of phishing attack.”

Here’s what you do to protect yourself, according to the Better Business Bureau:

- If someone you know sends you a QR code, also confirm before scanning it.
- Don’t open links from strangers
- Verify the source of the code.
- Install a QR scanner with added security.

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HEADLINE	12/06 Google Tag Manager abused; data stolen
SOURCE	https://therecord.media/web-skimmers-hit-300-sites-hidden-inside-google-tag-manager-containers/
GIST	<p>Threat actors have abused a legitimate feature of the Google Tag Manager service to secretly add and deploy malicious JavaScript code to more than 300 e-commerce stores since March this year.</p> <p>The malicious code—called a “web skimmer” or “Magecart script”—was used to collect the payment card details of online shoppers, data that was later offered for sale on underground carding forums, Gemini Advisory, a Recorded Future division specialized in financial fraud, said today.</p>

In total, this campaign hit 316 online stores and an estimated 88,000 users, who had their data sold online, Gemini Advisory said.

What is Google Tag Manager?

The common trait of this campaign was the abuse of [Google Tag Manager](#), a Google tool that lets website owners dynamically update tracking and analytics code on their sites. More specifically, the attacks abused GTM containers, a feature that can be used to package and ship entire blocks of JavaScript code.

The way the attack worked is that the hackers created their own GTM container, hacked into e-commerce stores, and secretly loaded the code without the owners' knowledge.

The attack worked and remained under the radar for months because web security tools and even website owners inspecting their own code would have had a hard time detecting the malicious GTM container from their own GTM tags.

But Gemini Advisory says that these malicious GTM containers loaded code that collected all the information that buyers added in payment forms, data that it sent to a remote collection server, from where it was later monetized on underground forums.

Two threat actors identified so far

Based on how the malicious GTM containers were abused, Gemini Advisory believes the attacks were orchestrated by two different groups.

The difference between the two is that Group One embedded the entire web skimmer inside their GTM container, while Group Two placed a loader inside the container that ran on the hacked site and loaded the web skimmer through an intermediary step.

“Although the two GTM container variants involve similar tactics—storing e-skimmers within GTM containers or housing scripts in GTM containers that load e-skimmers from dual-use domains—analysis of the two variants suggest that two different Magecart groups are responsible for each variant,” the Gemini Advisory team said in a [report](#) today.

The first group was the one that was most active, being responsible for two-thirds of all the hacks.

The first group began operations in March, while the second started its attacks in May. Both hacked online stores running on different platforms, including Magento, WordPress, Shopify, and BigCommerce.

Most of the compromised sites were small online store operations, and only one had enough traffic to be listed in the Alexa Top 50,000, researchers said.

Gemini's findings come just days after security firm RiskIQ disclosed details about [another web skimming operation](#), this time one that targeted WordPress sites running the WooCommerce plugin.

In addition, security firm Sansec has recently disclosed details about different web skimming operations, highlighting a trend where groups are slowly evolving away from web-based compromises to developing their own malware that they insert into hacked sites at the server level, for continued future access ([linux_avp](#), [CronRAT](#), [NginRAT](#)).

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HEADLINE	12/06 Hackers impersonate Iran govt entities
SOURCE	https://www.zdnet.com/article/hackers-pretending-to-be-iranian-govt-use-sms-messages-to-steal-credit-card-info-create-botnet/
GIST	Security company Check Point Research has uncovered a hacking campaign that involves cyberattackers impersonating Iranian government bodies to infect the mobile devices of Iranian citizens through SMS messages.

The SMS messages urge victims to download Android applications related to official Iranian services, such as the Iranian Electronic Judicial Services. The first messages typically claim that a complaint has been filed against the victim and that an application needs to be downloaded in order to respond.

Once downloaded, the applications allow hackers to access the victim's personal messages. Victims are asked to enter credit card information in order to cover a service fee, giving attackers access to card information that can now be used. With access to a victim's personal messages, the attackers can also get past two-factor authentication.

Check Point Research said the campaign is ongoing and is being used to infect tens of thousands of devices. In addition to the Check Point report, Iranian citizens [have taken to social media](#) to complain about the scams. Some Iranian news outlets [are also covering the issue](#).

"The threat actors then proceed to make unauthorized money withdrawals and turn each infected device into a bot, spreading the malware to others. CPR attributes attacks to threat actors, likely in Iran, who are financially motivated," the cybersecurity company explained.

"CPR estimates tens of thousands of Android devices have fallen victim, leading to theft of billions of Iranian Rial. Threat actors are using Telegram channels to transact malicious tools involved for as low as \$50. CPR's investigation reveals that data stolen from victims' devices has not been protected, making it freely accessible to third parties online."

Check Point's Shmuel Cohen said in one campaign, more than 1,000 people downloaded the malicious application in less than 10 days. Even if they did not enter credit card information, their device became part of the botnet.

Alexandra Gofman, threat intelligence team leader at Check Point, told ZDNet that the attacks appear to be a form of cybercrime and not attributed to any state-backed actors.

The velocity and spread of these cyberattacks are unprecedented, Gofman said, adding that it is an example of a monetarily-successful campaign aimed at the general public.

"The campaign exploits social engineering and causes major financial loss to its victims, despite the low quality and technical simplicity of its tools. There are a few reasons for its success. First, when official-looking government messages are involved, everyday citizens are inclined to investigate further, clicking the provided link," Gofman said.

"Second, due to the botnet nature of these attacks, where each infected device gets the command to distribute additional phishing SMS messages, these campaigns spread quickly to a large number of potential victims. Although these specific campaigns are widespread in Iran, they can take place in any other part of the world. I think it's important to raise awareness of social engineering schemes that are employed by malicious actors."

Check Point explained that the cybercriminals behind the attack are using a technique known as "smishing botnets." Devices that have already been compromised are used to send SMS messages to other devices.

The people behind the technique now offer it to others on Telegram for up to \$150, providing anyone with the infrastructure to launch similar attacks easily. Even though Iranian police [were able to arrest](#) one of the culprits, there are dozens of different cybercriminals in Iran using the tool now.

The company estimates that about \$1,000 to \$2,000 has been stolen from most victims. The attackers are also offering the personal information that was stolen to others online.

Gofman added that the general population of Iran is now in a situation where cyberattacks significantly impact day-to-day lives.

	<p>These attacks began with railways, Gofman said, noting that the company traced that attack to a group called Indra.</p> <p>"The attacks continued with gas stations, and then the national aviation company. Now, we're seeing yet another cyberattack that shows how even pure cybercrime can make headlines and chaos, hurting many in Iran," Gofman said.</p> <p>"Although we do not see a direct connection between these latest cyberattacks and the major aforementioned attacks, our latest insights show how even unsophisticated cyber attacks create significant damage on Iran's general population."</p>
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HEADLINE	12/06 Black Shadow targets Israeli victims
SOURCE	https://www.cyberscoop.com/hack-and-leak-group-black-shadow-keeps-targeting-israeli-victims/
GIST	<p>In October, a little-watched hacking group called Black Shadow went public with data it appeared to have stolen from an Israeli LGBTQ app, doxing users in a way that seemed intended to send a message.</p> <p>The breach was the result of a larger incident at Cyberserve, a web hosting company that also yielded sensitive information from the Machon Mor Medical Institute — which included medical data on roughly 290,000 patients — and other firms that possessed information about Israeli citizens. While the international media sorted through the fallout of the intrusions, security personnel reminded observers that the same hacking group previously breached Shirbit, an Israeli insurance firm, in December 2020, demanding a series of escalating ransom payments that analysts suggested weren't motivated by money at all.</p> <p>Instead, experts now say, the recent uptick in activity from Black Shadow — a group that's still shrouded in mystery, though it appears to be aligned with Iranian government interests — is the latest evidence of a broadening conflict between Iran and its foes, primarily Israel. While both sides have reportedly utilized hacking resources aimed at data theft and conventional espionage, Black Shadow seems to be an attention-seeking effort more along the lines of an information operation, experts say.</p> <p>That the group published data such as the names and passwords for users' accounts on the LGBTQ dating site Atraf, which also included sexual orientation and HIV status, betrays the intent of the attack, experts say.</p> <p>"The high sensitivity of the information that they decided to publish makes you wonder," said Lionel Sigal, a former Israeli intelligence official and the current head of cyber threat intelligence at CYE, an Israel-based cyber security firm.</p> <p>The model of combined hacking with information operations apparently designed to cause embarrassment or sway public opinion is not new. That the Black Shadow incidents roughly coincide with a festering digital conflict between Iran and Israel — a large number of gas pumps in Iran were hacked and taken offline in late October in an apparent attempt to sow anger at the government — is yielding new lessons.</p> <p>"It's a strategic way that countries can pass messages to each other or create some kind of deterrence," Sigal said. "I think it's a growing phenomenon."</p> <p>Black Shadow's approach appears to be straightforward: Hack targets that have some sort of connection to the Israeli government, or could be used to terrorize Israeli citizens. Announce the company has been hacked, thereby garnering maximum media coverage, and then demand a ransom that grows exponentially in a short period of time.</p> <p>Key to the approach is posting data either to websites or via Telegram channels. The Israeli government has successfully lobbied the chat platform to remove some accounts, but others quickly pop up under another name.</p>

The group is likely operated by or in conjunction with the government of Iran, Sigal and others say, as part of the ongoing back and forth between the two countries that involves both cyberattacks and physical actions.

A website purportedly belonging to Black Shadow posts data apparently stolen during its hacks, such as a Nov. 18 post of personal identification records of Israelis sourced from old Shirbit data. The site was originally registered in 2016, but went dormant by November 2017, according to internet registration records. It spun back up in May of this year and began posting links to download the data stolen in the group's hacks, and remains accessible.

An attempt to contact the group through information posted to the site was unsuccessful.

The group is among a crop of apparently Iranian hacking groups.

Amitai Ben Shushan Eherlich, a threat intelligence researcher with cybersecurity firm Sentinel One, said Black Shadow is "one of several" extortion aliases used by a group [the firm calls "Agrius,"](#) which has employed a series of sometimes sophisticated attacks against primarily Israeli targets starting in 2020.

Microsoft's Threat Intelligence Center on Nov. 16 [published research](#) examining "a gradual evolution" of malicious Iranian hacking activity. Iranian-aligned hackers, including the Black Shadow group, are increasingly using ransomware to either collect funds or disrupt targets, Microsoft's analysts noted, while also showing more patience and persistence.

The Microsoft research concluded that Iranian hackers are evolving into "more competent threat actors" who can carry out attacks in a variety of ways for a variety of purposes.

Another group emerged in September calling itself "Moses Staff" with similar tactics, such as targeting Israeli companies, leaking data, and encrypting networks, [according to the Israeli firm Check Point](#). That group's messaging was explicitly political and had no ransom demand. Moses Staff had some similarities to Black Shadow, Check Point said, and [another group called Pay2Key](#).

"It's all the same," said Omri Segev Moyal, the CEO and co-founder of Israeli security firm Profero.

The way Black Shadow courts media attention and chooses its targets makes it more likely an intelligence-backed operation rather than a military one, Moyal added.

The group, like other named hacking groups believed to be associated with nation states, gives governments plausible deniability. "Cyber attribution is hard, but in this case it does look like [Iran]," Moyal said.

The Department of Homeland Security Agency's Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency — along with the FBI and top agencies in the U.K. and Australia — [warned on Nov. 17](#) of an Iranian government-sponsored hacking group exploiting known vulnerabilities in targets around the world, including in the U.S. and Australia.

The hack-and-leak aspect of the group's activity can be devastating, Sigal said. The LGBTQ data may have outed people against their will, and also included data on some users' HIV status. The context of the activity, he said, "is the context of war." Whereas in the past Iranian-backed organizations executed physical attacks on Israeli targets, by bombing a bus, for instance, this kind of Black Shadow attack targets civilians in a different way.

The U.S. government has also accused Iran of directly targeting U.S. citizens.

The [Department of Justice on Nov. 18 unsealed charges](#) against two Iranians accused of stealing private U.S. voter registration data and targeting some voters with emails threatening violence if recipients did not

	<p>vote for Donald Trump. The emails, which purported to be from the Proud Boys, a violent, right wing nationalist organization, were one relatively unsophisticated part of a sprawling plan to interfere in the 2020 U.S. elections, prosecutors said.</p> <p>In somewhat similar fashion, the Black Shadow activities strike some experts as unsophisticated. On their own, they're not as sophisticated or complex as other state-backed groups, even Iranian, Moyal said. From a technical perspective, the group's capabilities are "super weak," he said. "They are not intelligent at all," typically scanning for known vulnerabilities in technology made by commercial firms like Fortinet and Microsoft.</p> <p>Ari Eitan, the vice president of research at cybersecurity firm Intezer, echoed that the methods are not sophisticated. "Despite the fact that it may seem like they are creating a lot of damage, I like to think that they are basically script kiddies with good PR," he said.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/06 Colorado utility significant disruption
SOURCE	https://www.securityweek.com/cyberattack-causes-significant-disruption-colorado-electric-utility
GIST	<p>An electric utility in Colorado has disclosed an apparent ransomware attack that resulted in significant disruption and damage.</p> <p>The Delta-Montrose Electric Association (DMEA) is a member-owned and locally controlled rural electric cooperative that serves more than 34,000 customers in Colorado's Montrose, Delta, and Gunnison counties. It is part of Touchstone Energy Cooperatives, a cooperative federation that has over 750 members across the United States.</p> <p>DMEA last week revealed that it had discovered a breach of its internal network on November 7. The hacker attack resulted in disruption to phone, email, billing, and customer account systems, as well as documents, spreadsheets, and forms getting "corrupted."</p> <p>DMEA's CEO told local news outlets that the cyberattack led to 90% of internal controls and systems becoming corrupted, broken or disabled, and claimed that a majority of historical data dating back more than 20 years was lost.</p> <p>DMEA said its power grid and fiber network — the company also provides internet services — were not affected by the incident.</p> <p>The utility is still working on restoring affected services so it has told customers that all penalty fees and disconnections for non-payment will be suspended until the end of January 2022.</p> <p>While the company has not provided any information about the type of attack, its description of the incident suggests that it involved file-encrypting ransomware.</p> <p>DMEA said it found no evidence that sensitive data was compromised as a result of the breach.</p> <p>"We are highly confident no sensitive member or employee information has been compromised," the company said.</p> <p>This suggests that the utility may have been the victim of a ransomware attack in which cybercriminals only encrypt data on breached systems, without stealing any files. <i>SecurityWeek</i> has checked the websites of several major ransomware groups that typically threaten to leak data from victims unless a ransom is paid, and DMEA is not mentioned on any of the sites.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/06 UK convenience stores hit by cyberattack
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/cyberattack-closes-uk-convenience/

GIST	<p>The retailer SPAR has been forced to close some of its convenience stores in the UK after a cyber-attack on its IT systems.</p> <p>The digital assault occurred on Sunday and is being investigated by Lancashire Police.</p> <p>SPAR has around 2600 stores located across the UK. Because of the incident, 330 SPAR shops in the north of England were left unable to process payments made using credit or debit cards.</p> <p>The cyber-attack also prevented the stores from using their accounting or stock control systems.</p> <p>While some of the affected shops remain closed in the wake of the attack, others have reopened but are accepting only cash payments.</p> <p>"There has been an online attack on our IT systems which is affecting stores' ability to process card payments, meaning that several SPAR stores are currently closed," SPAR UK said in a tweet.</p> <p>"We apologize for any inconvenience this is causing our customers and we are working as quickly as possible to resolve the situation."</p> <p>The retailer said that the cyber-attack had impacted all of the company's IT systems, including staff email accounts. Technicians have reportedly been working through the night to mitigate the effects of the incident.</p> <p>A SPAR store on the campus of Hull University in Yorkshire was among the locations forced into closure by the incident. Stores located elsewhere in Yorkshire and others in Lancashire have also been impacted.</p> <p>SPAR Oswaldtwistle said on social media that SPAR stores have also been affected by "an online attack" on the IT system of its primary wholesaler, James Hall & Co Ltd, of Preston, Lancashire. The website of James Hall was offline at the time of publication.</p> <p>On Sunday morning, SPAR in Ribchester, Lancashire, posted on social media: "Due to a major & widespread IT failure across the entire Northern SPAR network, all Northern SPAR stores will be closed for an unknown period of time."</p> <p>In an update added today, the store stated: "Sadly the SPAR store side of our business remains closed today, however our Post Office is able to be open."</p>
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HEADLINE	12/06 Newstar Websites money launderer jailed
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/prison-for-newstar-websites-money/
GIST	<p>The United States has imprisoned a woman for her role in a child sexual abuse material (CSAM) subscription service that produced millions of images and videos of sexualized minors.</p> <p>Patrice Eileen Wilowski-Mevorah of Tampa, Florida, was one of four people charged in August in connection with the Newstar Websites operated by Newstar Enterprise, out of Florida. Since then, two more defendants have been charged.</p> <p>According to court documents, Newstar purported to own and operate modeling sites hosted on servers in the United States and overseas. However, the company was in reality "an internet-based business aimed at for-profit sexual exploitation of vulnerable children under the guise of 'child modeling.'"</p> <p>Among the content sold by Newstar Websites were images and videos depicting children as young as six years old wearing transparent underwear. Other content featured children dressed in revealing swimsuits or mini-skirts holding provocative poses.</p>

	<p>Most minors whose images were sold through the website were residents of Eastern Europe.</p> <p>Newstar Enterprise was founded around 2005. Wilowski-Mevorah joined the company around 2009 and was still working for it in November 2019, when law enforcement authorities executed several search warrants across the United States and simultaneously seized Newstar Websites' servers in the United States and Europe.</p> <p>On July 6, Wilowski-Mevorah pleaded guilty to laundering money for Newstar Enterprise. Court documents show that during her decade with the company, the 53-year-old laundered at least \$2.3m.</p> <p>Wilowski-Mevorah fraudulently opened payment-processing accounts and bank accounts for her employer under the pretense that the accounts were for a fictitious jewelry company.</p> <p>"For 10 years, she routinely used the phony company's accounts to conceal criminal proceeds from the Newstar Websites and transfer those proceeds back to principal members of the Newstar Enterprise," said the US Attorney's Office for the Middle District of Florida.</p> <p>On December 3, US District Judge Mary S. Scriven sentenced Wilowski-Mevorah to five years and three months in federal prison. The court also ordered Wilowski-Mevorah to forfeit \$236,410.70.</p> <p>Newstar defendant Mary Lou Bjorkman has pleaded guilty to money laundering and is awaiting sentencing. Of the remaining defendants, two are now deceased, one has been indicted and is pending extradition, and the other has been indicted and is pending trial.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/07 Nordic Choice Hotels hit by ransomware
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/nordic-choice-hotels-hit-by-conti-ransomware-no-ransom-demand-yet/
GIST	<p>Nordic Choice Hotels has now confirmed a cyber attack on its systems from the Conti ransomware group.</p> <p>The incident primarily impacts the hotel's guest reservation and room key card systems.</p> <p>Although there is no indication of passwords or payment information being affected, information pertaining to guest bookings was potentially leaked.</p> <p>The Scandinavian hotel chain, with its brands—Comfort, Quality, and Clarion, employs over 16,000 staff members and has 200 properties across Scandinavia, Finland, and the Baltics.</p> <p>Key cards out of service</p> <p>Earlier this week, Nordic Choice Hotels group announced its IT systems were hit by a "computer virus" on Thursday, December 2nd.</p> <p>The incident left the hotel staff without access to the hotel's reservation systems that manage check-in, check-out, payments, and bookings.</p> <p>Although the staff switched to manual procedures to carry out business operations, the hotel advised guests that delays are to be expected.</p> <p>Members are currently unable to log in to their Nordic Choice Hotels accounts to book and manage reservations, or apply reward points, although it remains possible to book stays without being logged in...</p> <p>A subsequent blog post by the hospitality group confirmed the scope of the incident expands to Nordic Choice Club members, in addition to the current hotel guests.</p> <p>No ransom demand yet, law enforcement engaged</p>

Law enforcement agencies including the Norwegian Data Protection Authority and the Norwegian National Security Authority were notified of the attack by the hotel company on December 2nd—the same day as the attack.

"Our investigations do not currently give any indication that data has been leaked, but we can't guarantee that is the case. Therefore, the incident entails a risk that information about the guests' bookings may be lost," explains the company in a [release](#).

"This information consists of name, email address, telephone number, date of the visit and any information the guest may have provided in connection with their visit. There is no indication that card or payment information has been leaked."

Although the hospitality group cannot be sure of any data leak just yet, the decision to be transparent and inform its members of the incident is an effort to keep them alerted against any suspicious communications—texts, messages, phone calls, or emails, that may be directed at them.

At this time, the hotel group has "chosen not to contact" the threat actors behind the attack, nor have they received a ransom demand from the [Conti ransomware](#) group.

BleepingComputer also did not come across the hotel group's name on Conti's data leak pages, indicating the ransomware attack is in early stages and negotiations may not have begun yet.

Conti ransomware is a private Ransomware-as-a-Service (RaaS) operation believed to be controlled by a Russian-based cybercrime group known as [Wizard Spider](#).

Conti shares some of its code with the notorious [Ryuk Ransomware](#), whose TrickBot distribution channels they started using after Ryuk activity decreased around July 2020.

This ransomware gang has previously targeted over a dozen [healthcare and first responder organizations](#), and [police department systems](#).

Earlier this year, Conti breached networks of Ireland's [Health Service Executive](#) (HSE) and [Department of Health \(DoH\)](#), asking the former to pay a [\\$20 million ransom](#) after successfully encrypting its systems.

"Over the weekend, we have managed to put in place replacement solutions at most of our hotels. The work is now in full swing to get everyone back into normal operation, something we think will be done within the next few days," says Bjørn Arild Wisth, Deputy CEO at Nordic Choice Hotels.

During the next few days, as the company works with law enforcement to remediate the cyber attack, some hotel properties may continue to experience delays with regards to check-in, check-out, and reservation processes.

"Our customer center currently has limited opportunity to change and add bookings, but is in place to be able to answer any questions. In that case, we recommend that you send us an email at booking@choice.no or use our website for further information," advises Nordic Choice Hotels.

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HEADLINE	12/07 Bots monitor every tweet to push scams
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/twitter-bots-monitor-every-tweet-to-push-cryptocurrency-scams/
GIST	<p>Scammers monitor every tweet containing requests for support on MetaMask, TrustWallet, and other popular crypto wallets, and respond to them with scam links in just seconds.</p> <p>To conduct these targeted phishing attacks, scammers abuse Twitter APIs that allow them to monitor all public tweets for specific keywords or phrases.</p>

If those phrases are present, these same programs will direct Twitter bots under the scammer's control to automatically reply to the tweets as fake support agents with links to scams that steal cryptocurrency wallets.

These attacks are nothing new, and [we reported on them in May](#). However, these attacks have expanded to other cryptocurrencies, and the scams continue to run rampant.

Therefore, we felt it was vital for our readers to revisit this attack and illustrate how it works, so you do not accidentally become a victim.

The anatomy of the Twitter crypto scam

In tests conducted by BleepingComputer, tweets containing the words 'support,' 'help,' or 'assistance' along with the keywords like 'MetaMask,' 'Phantom,' 'Yoroi,' and 'Trust Wallet' will result in almost instantaneous replies from Twitter bots with fake support forms or accounts.

Other keywords have mixed results, such as wallets' names and the word 'stolen.'

Our first test of these cryptocurrency scam bots was to pack a tweet with numerous keywords and see what would happen.

We then [conducted further tests](#) to try and narrow down what keywords would trigger the bot's replies.

Within seconds of posting our tests, we received replies from numerous scam accounts pretending to be MetaMask and TrustWallet support accounts, "previous victims," or helpful users.

All of the scammer's replies share a common purpose - to steal the recovery phrases for a victim's wallet, which the attackers can then use to import the wallet onto their own devices.

To steal the recovery phrases (aka seed phrases), the threat actors set up support forms on Google Docs and other cloud platforms.

These forms impersonate a basic support form, asking the user for their email address, the problem they are having, and their wallet's recovery phrase...

When prompting for the recovery phrase, they include silly language about it being processed by their "encrypted cloud bot," likely to try and convince the user to post the sensitive information.

Prompting the victim to enter their recovery phrase

Once the recovery phrase is sent to the attackers, it's game over and they now have full access to the cryptocurrency within your wallet and can transfer it to other wallets under their control.

Before you say that no one falls for these scams, sadly, that is untrue, and Twitter users have had their wallets, cryptocurrency, and NFTs, stolen.

Never share recovery phrases!

As a general rule, you should **never share your wallet's recovery phrase** with anyone. The recovery phrase is only for you, and no legitimate support person from MetaMask, TrustWallet, or elsewhere will ever ask for it.

It is also important to remember not to share your screen with an untrusted user who then requests that you display your recovery phrase. At that point, they can simply take a screenshot and write it down manually.

Ultimately, these attacks will continue unless Twitter figures out a way to prevent these bots from running rampant, restrict the use of specific keywords, or put more stringent controls on who can join their developer platform.

	BleepingComputer has reached out to Twitter with questions regarding these attacks and the API abuse but has not received a reply.
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HEADLINE	12/06 Microsoft: 50% discount to Office pirates
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/microsoft/microsoft-offers-50-percent-subscription-discounts-to-office-pirates/
GIST	<p>Microsoft is offering discounts of up to 50% on Microsoft 365 subscriptions to those using pirated versions of Microsoft Office willing to switch to a genuine version.</p> <p>This promotional offer is sent to Office users if Microsoft detects the version installed is non-genuine, and it shows as an alert under the top menu as first reported by Ghacks.</p> <p>The message displayed is a call to action for those likely using a pirate copy of Microsoft Office: "GET UP TO 50% OFF. For a limited time, save up to 50% on a genuine Microsoft 365 subscription."</p> <p>When clicked, the alert sends you to a Microsoft 365 landing page warning that pirated software can expose your computer to security threats.</p> <p>Among the risks behind counterfeit software, Redmond says you'll be prone to higher exposure to virus and malware attacks, identity theft, corrupted files and data loss, and the inability to receive critical updates or edit files, all of these being legitimate points.</p> <p>The 50% discount is applied at checkout for the first year of an annual subscription on Microsoft 365 Family (\$99.99/year) subscriptions for up to six users with 6TB of cloud storage and Microsoft 365 Personal (\$69.99/year) subscriptions for one person with 1TB of storage.</p> <p>With this strategy, Microsoft is likely trying to kill two birds with one stone: this will get more paying Office customers and, just as importantly, it will also increase the number of active subscriptions for the company's cloud services.</p> <p>While some of those using non-genuine Microsoft Office software will likely not budge and will keep using it, others will probably find the discounted prices appealing enough to get a subscription and join Redmond's customer base.</p> <p>Microsoft also links to a separate page on its support website with details on measures to be taken by those whose Office software who paid for a license but still had it tagged as non-genuine.</p> <p>To fix this issue, you will have to completely uninstall and reinstall Office to ensure all traces of the counterfeit version are removed using the steps outlined here.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/06 France: Nobelium attacking organizations
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/france-warns-of-nobelium-cyberspies-attacking-french-orgs/
GIST	<p>The French national cyber-security agency ANSSI said today that the Russian-backed Nobelium hacking group behind last year's SolarWinds hack has been targeting French organizations since February 2021.</p> <p>While ANSSI (short for Agence Nationale de la Sécurité des Systèmes d'Information) has not determined how Nobelium compromised email accounts belonging to French orgs, it added that the hackers used them to deliver malicious emails targeting foreign institutions.</p>

In turn, French public orgs were also the targets of spoofed emails sent from servers belonging to foreign entities, believed to be compromised by the same threat actor.

The infrastructure used by Nobelium in the attacks against French entities was mainly set up using virtual private servers (VPS) from different hosting companies (favoring servers from OVH and located close to the targeted countries).

"Overlaps have been identified in the tactics, techniques & procedures (TTP) between the phishing campaigns monitored by ANSSI and the SOLARWINDS supply chain attack in 2020," ANSSI [explained](#) in a report published today.

To defend against this hacking group's attacks, ANSSI recommends restricting the execution of email attachments to block malicious files delivered in phishing campaigns.

The French cyber-security agency also advises at-risk organizations to tighten Active Directory security (and AD servers in particular) using its [Active Directory security hardening guide](#).

Nobelium and its high profile targets

[Nobelium](#), the hacking group behind last year's SolarWinds supply-chain attack, which led to the breach of multiple US federal agencies, is the hacking division of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), also tracked as APT29, The Dukes, or Cozy Bear.

The US government [formally accused the SVR division](#) in April of orchestrating the "broad-scope cyber espionage campaign" that hit SolarWinds.

Cybersecurity firm Volexity also [linked the attacks to the same threat actor](#) based on tactics observed in incidents starting with 2018.

In May, the Microsoft Threat Intelligence Center (MSTIC) shared info on a Nobelium phishing campaign [targeting government agencies from 24 countries](#) worldwide.

As further reported by Microsoft in recent months, [Nobelium is still targeting the global IT supply chain](#), having attacked 140 managed service providers (MSPs) and cloud service providers and breached at least 14 since May 2021.

Nobelium also [targeted Active Directory Federation Services \(AD FS\) servers](#), attempting to compromise governments, think tanks, and private companies from the US and Europe using a new passive and highly targeted backdoor dubbed FoggyWeb.

Microsoft revealed in October that [Nobelium was the most active Russian hacking group](#) between July 2020 and June 2021, coordinating the attacks behind 92% of alerts Microsoft sent to customers regarding Russia-based threat activity.

Earlier today, Mandiant linked the hacking group to attempts to breach government and enterprise networks around the world by targeting their MSPs with a [new backdoor dubbed Ceeloader](#) designed to deploy further malware and harvest sensitive info of political interest to Russia.

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HEADLINE	12/06 Russian hacking group stealthy malware
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/russian-hacking-group-uses-new-stealthy-ceeloader-malware/
GIST	The Nobelium hacking group continues to breach government and enterprise networks worldwide by targeting their cloud and managed service providers and using a new custom "Ceeloader" malware.

[Nobelium](#) is Microsoft's name for the threat actor behind last year's SolarWinds supply-chain attack that led to the compromise of several US federal agencies. This group is believed to be the hacking division of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), commonly known as APT29, The Dukes, or Cozy Bear.

While Nobelium is an advanced hacking group using [custom malware](#) and [tools](#), they still leave traces of activity that researchers can use to analyze their attacks.

In a new report from Mandiant, researchers used this activity to uncover tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP) used by the hacking group, as well as a new custom downloader called "Ceeloder."

Furthermore, the researchers break Nobelium into two distinct clusters of activity attributed to UNC3004 and UNC2652, which could mean that Nobelium is two cooperating hacking groups.

Supply chain attack

Based on the activity seen by Mandiant, the Nobelium actors continue to [breach cloud providers and MSPs](#) as a way to gain initial access to their downstream customer's network environment.

"In at least one instance, the threat actor identified and compromised a local VPN account and made use of this VPN account to perform reconnaissance and gain further access to internal resources within the victim CSP's environment, which ultimately led to the compromise of internal domain accounts," explained Mandiant.

In at least one other breach, the hacking group used the CRYPTBOT password-stealing malware to steal valid session tokens used to authenticate to the victim's Microsoft 365 environment.

It is noteworthy that Nobelium compromises multiple accounts within a single environment, using each of them for separate functions, thus not risking the entire operation in the case of exposure.

"The threat actor used the protocols mainly to perform reconnaissance, distribute beacons (Cobalt Strike) around the network, as well as run native Windows commands for credential harvesting."

A new custom "Ceeloder" malware

Nobelium is known for its development and use of custom malware that allows backdoor access to networks, the downloading of further malware, network tracing, NTLM credential theft, and other malicious behavior.

Mandiant has discovered a new custom downloader called "Ceeloder" written in C and supports the execution of shellcode payloads directly in memory.

The malware is heavily obfuscated, and mixes calls to the Windows API with large blocks of junk code to evade detection by security software.

Ceeloder communicates via HTTP, while the C2 response is decrypted using AES-256 in CBC mode. The custom Ceeloder downloader is installed and executed by a Cobalt Strike beacon as needed and does not include persistence to allow it to automatically run when Window is started.

Nobelium has used numerous custom malware strains in the past, specifically during the Solarwinds attacks and in a [phishing attack](#) against the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

Multiple hiding tricks

To hamper attempts at tracing the attacks, Nobelium uses residential IP addresses (proxies), TOR, VPS (Virtual Private Services), and VPN (Virtual Private Networks) to access the victim's environment.

In some cases, Mandiant identified compromised WordPress sites used to host second-stage payloads that are fetched and launched into memory by Ceeloder.

	<p>Finally, the actors used legitimate Microsoft Azure-hosted systems with IP addresses that had proximity to the victim's network.</p> <p>This approach helps blend external activity and internal traffic, making detecting the malicious activity unlikely and the analysis harder.</p> <p>Nobelium still active</p> <p>Mandiant warns that the activity of Nobelium is heavily focused on the collection of intelligence, as the researchers saw evidence of the hackers exfiltrating documents that are of political interest to Russia.</p> <p>Microsoft has previously linked UNC2652 and UNC3004 to UNC2452, the group responsible for the SolarWinds supply chain attack, so it's plausible that they are all under the same "Nobelium" umbrella.</p> <p>However, Mandiant underlines that there is insufficient evidence to attribute this with high confidence. What matters for defenders is that hackers are still leveraging third parties and trusted vendors like CSPs to infiltrate valuable target networks, so organizations must remain vigilant, constantly consider new IOCs, and keep their systems up to date.</p> <p>Mandiant has updated the UNC2452 whitepaper on that front with all new TTPs observed in the 2021 campaigns.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/06 Breached site begs hacker return \$119M
SOURCE	https://www.vice.com/en/article/v7dv4a/hacked-cryptocurrency-platform-begs-hacker-to-please-return-dollar119-million
GIST	<p>Last week, an unknown hacker or hackers stole around 2,100 BTC (\$118,500,000) and 151 ETH (\$679,000) worth of cryptocurrency tokens from a blockchain company called BadgerDAO.</p> <p>Now, the blockchain "bridge" protocol BadgerDAO is pleading with the hacker to return the stolen funds.</p> <p>“You have taken funds that do not belong to you, but we are willing to work with you and compensate you for identifying this vulnerability in the systems,” BadgerDAO wrote in a public announcement. “We are providing you with a direct line of communication to discuss a peaceful resolution without involving any outside parties. Contact us to discuss further and do the right thing on behalf of the community.”</p> <p>The hack on BadgerDAO took advantage of an old-school web-based attack: The hacker was able to steal an API key that gave them control of BadgerDAO’s account on Cloudflare, the project’s content delivery network for its site. This gave the hacker the ability to inject a malicious script on the site that prompted users to give up wallet permissions, which then allowed the hackers to steal customers’ cryptocurrency.</p> <p>While asking a robber to return the proceeds of their heist may seem like a desperate, hopeless, strategy, it has worked before.</p> <p>Earlier this year, the popular cryptocurrency platform Poly Network was hacked, and lost around \$600 million. The company posted a public letter to the hacker, calling them “Dear Hacker” and “Mr. White Hat,” appealing to their goodwill. Surprisingly, after several public exchanges posted on the blockchain, the strategy worked and the hacker ultimately returned all the stolen funds.</p> <p>People involved with BadgerDAO are, for now, cautious on whether this will work.</p> <p>“[I am] not comfortable publicly sharing my personal opinion on it. We have professionals handling the strategy and don't want to possibly affect it,” a core team member of the Badger team, who goes by Jonto, told Motherboard in an online chat. “Team is largely focused on reopening the protocol and remuneration plans to bring forward to the community for discussion.”</p>

	It's been a really bad week for cryptocurrency projects and exchanges. Over the weekend, hackers stole around \$150 million from BitMart, an exchange that bills itself as "the most trusted crypto trading platform." The company has promised to use its own reserve funds to compensate the victims, and—for now—it has not asked the hacker to return the loot.
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HEADLINE	12/06 Rohingya sue Facebook: facilitate genocide
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/dec/06/rohingya-sue-facebook-myanmar-genocide-us-uk-legal-action-social-media-violence
GIST	<p>Facebook's negligence facilitated the genocide of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar after the social media network's algorithms amplified hate speech and the platform failed to take down inflammatory posts, according to legal action launched in the US and the UK.</p> <p>The platform faces compensation claims worth more than £150bn under the coordinated move on both sides of the Atlantic.</p> <p>A class action complaint lodged with the northern district court in San Francisco says Facebook was "willing to trade the lives of the Rohingya people for better market penetration in a small country in south-east Asia."</p> <p>It adds: "In the end, there was so little for Facebook to gain from its continued presence in Burma, and the consequences for the Rohingya people could not have been more dire. Yet, in the face of this knowledge, and possessing the tools to stop it, it simply kept marching forward."</p> <p>A letter submitted by lawyers to Facebook's UK office on Monday says clients and their family members have been subjected to acts of "serious violence, murder and/or other grave human rights abuses" as part of a campaign of genocide conducted by the ruling regime and civilian extremists in Myanmar.</p> <p>It adds that the social media platform, which launched in Myanmar in 2011 and quickly became ubiquitous, aided the process. Lawyers in Britain expect to lodge a claim in the high court, representing Rohingya in the UK and refugees in camps in Bangladesh, in the new year.</p> <p>"As has been widely recognised and reported, this campaign was fomented by extensive material published on and amplified by the Facebook platform," says the letter from the law firm McCue Jury & Partners.</p> <p>Facebook admitted in 2018 that it had not done enough to prevent the incitement of violence and hate speech against the Rohingya, the Muslim minority in Myanmar. An independent report commissioned by the company found that "Facebook has become a means for those seeking to spread hate and cause harm, and posts have been linked to offline violence".</p> <p>The McCue letter says: "Despite Facebook's recognition of its culpability and its pronouncements about its role in the world, there has not been a single penny of compensation, nor any other form of reparations or support, offered to any survivor."</p> <p>In the US and UK, the allegations against Facebook include: Facebook's algorithms amplified hate speech against the Rohingya people; it failed to invest in local moderators and fact checkers; it failed to take down specific posts inciting violence against Rohingya people; and it did not shut down specific accounts or delete groups and pages that were encouraging ethnic violence.</p> <p>The US complaint cites Facebook posts that appeared in a Reuters report, with one in 2013 stating: "We must fight them the way Hitler did the Jews, damn Kalars [a derogatory term for Rohingya people]."</p> <p>Another post in 2018, showing a photograph of a boatload of Rohingya refugees, says: "Pour fuel and set fire so that they can meet Allah faster."</p>

	<p>The number of Rohingya killed in 2017, during the Myanmar military’s “clearance operations”, is likely to be more than 10,000, according to the medical charity Médecins sans Frontières.</p> <p>About 1 million Rohingyas live in Cox’s Bazar refugee camp, in south-eastern Bangladesh, where McCue and Mishcon de Reya, which is also working on the UK-based case, expect to recruit more claimants.</p> <p>The UK case has about 20 claimants so far, while in the US the class action suit hopes to act on behalf of an estimated 10,000 Rohingya in the country.</p> <p>The Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen has alleged the platform is fanning ethnic violence in countries including Ethiopia and is not doing enough to stop it. She said 87% of the spending on combating misinformation at Facebook is spent on English content, while only 9% of users are English speakers.</p> <p>Responding to Haugen’s revelations, Facebook has said it had a “comprehensive strategy” in place for countries at risk of conflict and violence, including use of native speakers and third-party fact checkers. Facebook’s owner, Meta, has been approached for comment.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/06 Russian hackers not easing up on spying
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/6/report-says-russian-hackers-havent-eased-spying-ef/
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON (AP) - The elite Russian state hackers behind last year’s massive SolarWinds cyberespionage campaign hardly eased up this year, managing plenty of infiltrations of U.S. and allied government agencies and foreign policy think tanks with consummate craft and stealth, a leading cybersecurity firm reported Monday.</p> <p>On the anniversary of the public disclosure of the SolarWinds intrusions, Mandiant said the hackers associated with Russia’s SVR foreign intelligence agency continued to steal data “relevant to Russian interests” with great effect using novel, stealthy techniques that it detailed in a mostly technical report aimed at helping security professionals stay alert.</p> <p>It was Mandiant, not the U.S. government, that disclosed SolarWinds.</p> <p>While the number of government agencies and companies hacked by the SVR was smaller this year than last, when some 100 organizations were breached, assessing the damage is difficult, said Charles Carmakal, Mandiant’s chief technical officer. Overall, the impact is quite serious. “The companies that are getting hacked, they are also losing information.”</p> <p>“Not everybody is disclosing the incident(s) because they don’t always have to disclose it legally,” he said, complicating damage-assessment.</p> <p>The Russian cyber spying unfolded, as always, mostly in the shadows as the U.S. government was consumed in 2021 by a separate, eminently “noisy” and headline-grabbling cyber threat - ransomware attacks launched not by nation-state hackers but rather criminal gangs. As it happens, those gangs are largely protected by the Kremlin.</p> <p>The Mandiant findings follow an October report from Microsoft that the hackers, whose umbrella group it calls Nobelium, continue to infiltrate the government agencies, foreign policy think tanks and other organizations focused on Russian affairs through the cloud service companies and so-called managed services providers on which they increasingly rely. Mandiant tips its hat to Microsoft’s threat researchers in the report.</p> <p>Mandiant researchers said the Russian hackers “continue to innovate and identify new techniques and tradecraft” that lets them linger in victim networks, hinder detection and confuse attempts to attribute hacks to them. In short, Russia’s most elite state-backed hackers are as crafty and adaptable as ever.</p>

	<p>Mandiant did not identify individual victims or describe what specific information may have been stolen but did say unspecified “diplomatic entities” that received malicious phishing emails were among the targets.</p> <p>Often, the researchers say, the hackers’ path of least resistance to their targets were cloud-computing services. From there, they used stolen credentials to infiltrate networks. The report describes how in one case they gained access to one victim’s Microsoft 365 system through a stolen session. And, the report says, the hackers routinely relied on advanced tradecraft to cover their tracks.</p> <p>One clever technique discussed in the report illustrates the ongoing cat-and-mouse game that digital espionage entails. Hackers set up intrusion beachheads using IP addresses, a numeric designation that identifies its location on the internet, that were physically located near an account they are trying to breach - in the same address block, say, as the person’s local internet provider. That makes it highly difficult for security software to detect a hacker using stolen credentials posing as someone trying to access their work account remotely.</p> <p>The SolarWinds hack exploited vulnerabilities in the software supply-chain system and went undetected for most of 2020 despite compromises at a broad swath of federal agencies - including the Justice Department - and dozens of companies, primarily telecommunications and information technology providers and including Mandiant and Microsoft.</p> <p>The hacking campaign is named SolarWinds after the U.S. software company whose product was exploited in the first-stage infection of that effort. The Biden administration imposed sanctions last April in response to the hack, including against six Russian companies that support the country’s cyber efforts.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/06 Websites of Chinese hacking group seized
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/06/business/microsoft-china-hackers.html?action=click&module=Well&pgtype=Homepage&section=Technology
GIST	<p>Microsoft said on Monday that it had seized 42 websites from a Chinese hacking group in an effort to disrupt the group’s intelligence-gathering operations.</p> <p>The company said in a news release that a federal court in Virginia had granted Microsoft’s request to allow its Digital Crimes Unit to take over the U.S.-based websites, which were being run by a hacker group known as Nickel or APT15. The company is redirecting the websites’ traffic to secure Microsoft servers to “help us protect existing and future victims while learning more about Nickel’s activities.”</p> <p>Microsoft said it had been tracking Nickel since 2016 and had found that its “highly sophisticated” attacks intended to install unobtrusive malware that allowed for surveillance and data theft.</p> <p>In this most recent case, Nickel was attacking organizations in 29 countries and was believed to be using the information it collected “for intelligence gathering from government agencies, think tanks, universities and human rights organizations,” Tom Burt, Microsoft’s corporate vice president of customer security and trust, said in the news release. Microsoft did not name the organizations that had been targeted.</p> <p>In court documents unsealed on Monday, Microsoft provided a detailed explanation of how the hackers targeted users through techniques like compromising third-party virtual private networks and phishing, in which a hacker poses as a trusted entity, often in an attempt to get someone to provide information like a password.</p> <p>After using those strategies to install malware on a user’s computer, the company said, Nickel would connect the computer with the malicious websites that Microsoft has since seized.</p> <p>The company argued that the process, because it involved hacking into computers and making changes to Microsoft operating systems and sometimes posing as Microsoft, “involves abuse of Microsoft’s</p>

trademarks and brands, and deceives users by presenting an unauthorized, modified version of Windows to those users.”

In its decision, the court agreed to issue a temporary restraining order against the hackers and to turn the websites, which were registered in Virginia, over to Microsoft.

“There is good cause to believe that, unless defendants are restrained and enjoined by order of this court, immediate and irreparable harm will result from the defendants’ ongoing violations,” the court wrote in its decision.

Microsoft said it had not discovered any new vulnerabilities in its products related to the attacks.

“Our disruption will not prevent Nickel from continuing other hacking activities, but we do believe we have removed a key piece of the infrastructure the group has been relying on for this latest wave of attacks,” Mr. Burt said.

Microsoft said it had found that the group often targeted regions in which China has a geopolitical interest. Nickel has targeted diplomatic organizations and foreign affairs ministries in the Western Hemisphere, Europe and Africa, among other groups, the company said.

The company said its Digital Crimes Unit, through 24 lawsuits, had taken down more than 10,000 malicious websites used by cybercriminals and almost 600 used by nation-state actors, and had blocked the registration of 600,000 more.

John Hammond, a researcher at the cybersecurity company Huntress Labs, said Microsoft’s move against the websites was a good example of “proactive protection against cybercrime.”

“This action from Microsoft is a fine example of making those pre-emptive efforts before threat actors do more damage,” Mr. Hammond said, adding that it “sends a signal to the aggressor when key infrastructure gets taken offline.”

U.S. cybersecurity agencies have warned that Chinese hacking presents a “major threat” to the United States and its allies.

In July, the Biden administration accused the Chinese government of being responsible for a hacking campaign this year that compromised a Microsoft email service used by some of the world’s largest companies and governments.

Some of the European governments who condemned China at the time accused it of allowing hackers to operate in Chinese territory, but the United States and Britain went a step further, saying the Chinese government was directly responsible.

China’s Ministry of State Security “has fostered an ecosystem of criminal contract hackers who carry out both state-sponsored activities and cybercrime for their own financial gain,” Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken said at the time.

Liu Pengyu, a spokesman for the Chinese Embassy, said at the time that the accusation was one of many “groundless attacks.”

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HEADLINE	12/06 Bitcoin ‘inventor’ wins trial; keeps \$50B
SOURCE	https://www.foxbusiness.com/business-leaders/man-claims-invented-bitcoin-wins-trial-keeps-bitcoins-50-billion

GIST	<p>Craig Wright, a computer scientist who claims to be the inventor of Bitcoin, prevailed in a highly publicized trial Monday that will allow him to hold onto a hoard of Bitcoins worth tens of billions of dollars.</p> <p>A Florida jury found that Wright did not owe half of 1.1 million Bitcoins to the family of David Kleiman, Wright's one-time business partner.</p> <p>The case was highly technical, with the jury listening to explanations of the intricate workings of cryptocurrencies as well as the murky origins of how Bitcoin came to be. Jurors took a full week to deliberate, repeatedly asking questions of lawyers on both sides as well as the judge on how cryptocurrencies work as well as the business relationship between the two men.</p> <p>At the center of the trial are 1.1 million Bitcoins, worth approximately \$50 billion based on Monday's prices. These were among the first Bitcoins to be created through mining and could only be owned by a person or entity involved with the digital currency from its beginning.</p> <p>Bitcoin's origins have always been a bit of a mystery, which is why this trial has drawn so much attention from outsiders. In October 2008 during the height of the financial crisis, a person named "Satoshi Nakamoto" published a paper laying out a framework for a digital currency that would not be tied to any legal or sovereign authority. Mining for the currency began a few months later.</p> <p>The name Nakamoto, roughly translated from Japanese to mean "at the center of," was never considered to be the real name of Bitcoin's creator. Some in the cryptocurrency community do not even believe Nakamoto was a single individual.</p> <p>Wright has claimed since 2016 that he is Nakamoto, a claim that has been met with skepticism from a sizable portion of the cryptocurrency community. Due to its structure, all transactions of Bitcoin are public and the 1.1 million Bitcoins in question have remained untouched since Wright's big reveal. Members of the Bitcoin community have regularly called for Wright to move just a fraction of the coins into a separate account to register that he truly is as wealthy as he claims.</p> <p>David Kleiman died in April 2013. Led by his brother Ira Kleiman, his family has claimed David Kleiman and Wright were close friends and co-created Bitcoin through a partnership. Kleiman's estate was suing for half of the Bitcoins in question as well as intellectual property rights.</p> <p>Wright's lawyers have said repeatedly that David Kleiman and Wright were friends and collaborated on work together, but their partnership had nothing to do with Bitcoin's creation or early operation.</p> <p>Wright has said he plans to donate much of the Bitcoin fortune to charity if he were to win at trial.</p>
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Terror Conditions

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HEADLINE	12/07 Iraq: IS motorcycle bomb kills 4 in Basra
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/explosion-kills-four-wounds-20-irags-basra-police-health-sources-2021-12-07/
GIST	<p>BASRA, Iraq, Dec 7 (Reuters) - A bomb killed four people in the southern Iraqi city of Basra on Tuesday, the first such attack in years in a part of the country that has enjoyed relative stability, and a senior official said Islamic State militants were suspected of carrying it out.</p> <p>The blast, near a major hospital in the predominantly Shi'ite Muslim city, was caused by a motorbike rigged with explosives, the military said in a statement, citing preliminary information.</p> <p>There was no immediate claim of responsibility.</p>

"The blast carries fingerprints of Daesh (Islamic State)," Basra Governor Asaad al-Edani told reporters.

Bomb attacks in the Basra area been rare - the last major one was in 2017, and claimed by Islamic State. The authorities have kept a tight grip on the area where the bulk of the OPEC member's oil is produced and exported.

Policemen were collecting body parts from a minibus that was badly damaged by the blast, a Reuters witness said. The street was covered with broken glass and blood. The governor announced three days of mourning.

"Today and after this terrorist act, the people of Basra must definitely be cautious and careful. Basra became unsafe today," said Mohammed Ibrahim, a car mechanic whose workshop was near the blast site.

Police and hospital sources earlier told Reuters that 20 people had been wounded, in addition to the four fatalities.

Helped by a U.S.-led coalition and Iran-backed forces, Iraq declared victory over Islamic State in December 2017, after driving it from swathes of territory where it had declared a self-styled Islamic Caliphate.

But the militant group continues to carry out sporadic attacks, particularly in the north, where Islamic State briefly seized a village on Sunday before being driven out.

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HEADLINE	12/07 Mozambique: militants abuse captive girls
SOURCE	https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10283693/Sex-slave-girls-forced-marry-ISIS-linked-militants-Mozambique-600-people-kidnapped.html
GIST	<p>ISIS-linked militants in Mozambique have forced sex-slave girls into marriage after abducting more than 600 women and children over the past three years, a new report reveals.</p> <p>Women and young girls were abducted during raids on towns and villages by the militants known locally as Al-Shabab, who have pledged allegiance to ISIS, which has claimed responsibility for a number of their attacks.</p> <p>The group force young women and girls to 'marry' their fighters 'who enslave and sexually abuse them' while some have been sold off to foreign militants for between \$600 and \$1,800, it said.</p> <p>'An armed group linked to the Islamic State (ISIS) has since 2018 kidnapped and enslaved more than 600 women and girls in Mozambique's northern Cabo Delgado province,' Human Rights Watch said in a statement.</p> <p>Some have been freed by Mozambican and foreign forces deployed this year to help quell the violence that has wreaked havoc in the region since October 2017.</p> <p>But some are still missing, the rights watchdog said.</p> <p>One 33-year-old woman said the Islamists assaulted her aunt, a local official, and then forced her at gunpoint to identify all the houses containing girls between ages 12 and 17 in her town.</p> <p>The woman counted 203 girls but did not know how many were abducted.</p> <p>A 27-year-old man said: 'Some mothers were begging the fighters to take them instead of their daughters. But one of the mashababos said they didn't want old women with children and diseases.'</p>

Meanwhile a 34-year-old former abductee said he was forced to select the women and girls for sex with the fighters on their return from military operations.

He said: 'Those who refused were punished with beatings, and no food for days.'

'An unknown number of women and girls remain in captivity in Mozambique, facing horrific abuses daily, including enslavement and rape by Al-Shabab fighters,' said Mausi Segun, HRW's Africa director.

She added: 'Al Shabab's leaders should immediately release every woman and girl in their captivity.'

'They should take all necessary steps to prevent rape and sexual abuse by their fighters, end child marriage, forced marriage, and the sale and enslavement of women and girls at their bases and areas of operation.'

HRW based its report on investigations including interviews with former abductees or their relatives, security sources and government officials.

The unrest that has plagued the gas-rich northern region of Mozambique has claimed at least 3,578 lives, including 1,575 civilians, according to US-based conflict tracking organisation, ACLED.

More than 800,000 others have been displaced, according to government and UN agencies.

Since July, more than 3,100 African, European and US soldiers have been deployed to the Cabo Delgado province to quell the unrest.

It was revealed earlier this year that girls as young as 11 were being beheaded by the militants.

One mother told Save the Children that her eldest son, 12, had his head cut off close to where she was hiding with her three other children when their village was raided.

Another mother described her heartache at leaving her murdered 11-year-old son in their village without a burial because her family were forced to flee.

Nearly 580,000 people left their homes last year as violence intensified across the gas-rich Cabo Delgado province where a group calling itself Islamic State Central Africa Province have been waging a brutal insurgency since 2017.

In March, ISIS-linked militants carried out a brutal massacre in the province that left dozens dead including one Briton.

According to eyewitness reports, the gunmen ruthlessly attacked nearby villages before their main assault on Palma, and even ambushed a convoy of foreigners trying to escape the violence.

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HEADLINE	12/07 Whistleblower on UK's Afghan evacuation
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/07/whistleblower-on-uks-afghan-evacuation-main-accusations
GIST	<p>Damning new light has been shed on the hour-by-hour decisions taken and frustrations encountered by a civil servant trying to help desperate Afghans flee the country in the days after the Taliban takeover.</p> <p>These are some of the key criticisms made by Raphael Marshall, a former desk officer at the Foreign Office.</p> <p>Thousands of emails went unread</p> <p>The government falsely claimed each request for evacuation was logged, when in fact thousands of emails – including many sent by MPs – went unread, Marshall said.</p>

When Tom Tugendhat, the chair of the foreign affairs committee, complained to the then foreign secretary Dominic Raab's private office that 10 cases he had raised in an email had not been read, a message was sent back to Tugendhat saying: "We were processing them."

But Marshall said that was wrong: "In fact, none of these cases had so far been processed at all."

Marshall estimated that up to 150,000 people applied for evacuation, but that fewer than 5% of those got any assistance. He added: "It is clear that some of those left behind have since been murdered by the Taliban."

When a new system was introduced following fury at the masses of unread emails, Marshall said all emails were then read, but nothing was done with their contents and that he thought this was "to allow the prime minister and the then foreign secretary to inform MPs that there were no unread emails".

The inbox was also at one point temporarily locked, which Marshall believes was evidence that the initial process was merely "a public relations purpose".

Evacuees prioritised without consistency

Even for those whose pleas for help were read, the criteria for deciding who should be eligible for evacuation was "unhelpful", Marshall said, because they did not lay out which, if all, should be met, leaving the decision to individuals' discretion.

He claimed Raab approved a list of professions that should be prioritised – such as judges and intelligence officers – but that this was not provided to people processing the emails.

This meant guards who had protected the British Embassy were not prioritised for evacuation, Marshall said. A lack of evidence required to back up people's claims about how much danger they were in also meant it was possible that "some evacuation spots were misallocated to people".

Those picked were then added to a spreadsheet; however, Marshall said, the summaries of people's cases were "inconsistent and likely often misleading".

A second spreadsheet was then created on which a single senior civil servant narrowed down further the people to prioritise. "There was therefore no effective review of these decisions," Marshall said.

Lack of staff, experience and equipment

No members of the Afghan special cases team had studied the country or worked on it previously, Marshall said. He said the "team leader" on two morning shifts "did not know that the correct term for people from [Afghanistan](#) was Afghans and referred repeatedly to 'Afghanis'".

Lack of experience was also a problem. Until 24 August, Marshall said calls were made "only in English", adding that the Dari text of emails inviting Afghans for evacuation was inaccurate, because it said a printed version of the email was necessary to enter Kabul airport, when in fact a digital copy was enough.

Soldiers drafted in to help with the evacuation requests were also given laptops that did not work because the FCDO's IT department had not issued the passwords to unlock them. Marshall believed this could "directly result in the deaths of people unnecessarily left behind".

FCDO 'working culture'

Despite the gravity of the situation, Marshall said, the default expectation remained that FCDO staff would continue to work normal hours, and only be asked to do extra shifts.

This resulted in frequent personnel changes and "serious shortages of capacity", Marshall said, blaming a "deliberate drive by the FCDO to prioritise 'work-life balance'". He concluded: "The FCDO's approach has undermined organisational effectiveness."

Poor integration between departments

Once the FCDO finalised the evacuation list, the details were sent to the Home Office for security checks. However, anyone who had not provided all relevant details in their initial request – such as passport number and date of birth – was eliminated from the process.

It took six hours for the Home Office to start confirming who had passed security clearance, and most took longer. This was a “predictable consequence” of sending one group of around 1,000 names in a single batch, Marshall said.

The night before the mass list was sent, a shorter list of “very high priority cases” was sent over. But Marshall said that when he checked on its progress 24 hours later, he discovered it had been “lost somewhere”.

When soldiers were drafted in to fill shifts civil servants could only be requested to fill, Marshall said their MoD clearance was not recognised by the FCDO, so they “had to be escorted” to “guard against potential espionage”.

Even within the Foreign Office, civil servants who worked at the former Department for International Development who had volunteered to help were “appalled by our chaotic system” and could not have live documents or access to the shared inbox because the IT systems had not been integrated, Marshall said.

PM’s push to evacuate animals at ‘direct expense’ of those at risk of murder

Despite the huge numbers of people trying to escape, Marshall said the FCDO “received an instruction from the prime minister” to use “considerable capacity” to help animals leave Afghanistan that were in the care of Nowzad, the charity run by [Paul “Pen” Farthing](#).

The fact that Nowzad said it could charter a plane itself was irrelevant, because British soldiers would have to spend time escorting the animals instead of human beings and there was limited capacity at the airport, he concluded.

Marshall believed the government “transported animals which were not at risk of harm at the direct expense of evacuating British nationals and people at risk of imminent murder, including interpreters who had served with the British Army”.

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HEADLINE	12/06 Mass starvation looms in Afghanistan
SOURCE	https://www.foxnews.com/world/more-than-half-of-afghans-face-extreme-hunger-as-humanitarian-crisis-intensifies-under-taliban-rule
GIST	<p>More than half of the population of Afghanistan is facing extreme hunger, a frightening development that will only intensify as winter gets set to grip the war-devastated country now under Taliban control.</p> <p>"The humanitarian crisis is escalating daily in Afghanistan. Hunger in the country has reached truly unprecedented levels. Nearly 23 million people—that is 55 percent of the population—are facing extreme levels of hunger, and nearly nine million of them are at risk of famine," said U.N. Refugee Agency spokesman Babar Baloch told Voice of America last week.</p> <p>Temperatures in Afghanistan have already begun to dip below freezing, with even colder temperatures still to come, a situation the U.N. warns could be dire for the over 3 million Afghans currently displaced by conflict and lack shelter, medical supplies, food, and clothes.</p> <p>Baloch, who just returned from a trip to Afghanistan, said that many elderly people and single mothers have been displaced with no food or shelter.</p>

"One single mother that I met, she has a six-month-old baby, a 12-year-old son, a 10-year-old daughter, and two parents to look after because the husband died in the fighting. So, she has to take care of the full family ... Her children go hungry. So, the two kids, the 12-year-old and the 10-year-old — they have to work," Baloch said.

Malnutrition levels across the country have soared ahead of the winter, with Baloch warning that about 1 million Afghan children are in imminent danger of death if more aid does not reach them.

While the U.N. Refugee Agency has been able to assist over 700,000 Afghans by reaching over 60,000 every week, the agency warns that the winter snow threatens to cut off access to millions still in desperate need of assistance.

The crisis comes less than four months after the final U.S. troops departed Afghanistan, with the pullout causing some experts to worry about a humanitarian "catastrophe" that could play out without the help American forces.

"If we don't preposition the food we need in those difficult areas that you can't reach once winter sets in ... we could have a catastrophe," World Food Programme executive director David Beasley [told Fox News](#) at the time.

Those fears have seemingly been realized, with the U.N. estimating that a total of 8.7 million people in the country [are at risk of famine](#) this winter.

The agency is now racing against the clock with a winter fundraising campaign to "help ease the burden for forcibly displaced families amid the most life-threatening months of the year".

An estimated \$374.9 million is needed to fund the needs of Afghanistan for 2022.

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Suspicious, Unusual

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HEADLINE	12/06 Monroe teen false reporting school threat
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/deputies-13-year-old-falsely-accuses-monroe-classmate-of-threatening-to-shoot-up-school
GIST	<p>MONROE, Wash. - A 13-year-old could be facing charges after deputies say they falsely accused a fellow classmate of making threats to shoot up the school.</p> <p>On Dec. 2, Snohomish County deputies began investigating reports that a student had received a call from a blocked number, saying there would be a school shooting at Hidden River Middle School in Monroe on Dec. 3.</p> <p>The 13-year-old named a specific classmate when telling deputies about the alleged phone call.</p> <p>Deputies were able to get phone records of the 13-year-old who reported it and the accused classmate. They discovered that the 13-year-old did not receive any incoming phone calls on that day from an unknown number, and the accused classmate did not make any phone calls to the 13-year-old.</p> <p>Throughout the investigation, deputies determined the accused classmate did not make any type of threat towards the school or any classmates.</p> <p>Deputies referred charges on the 13-year-old student for false reporting, which means the student could be charged.</p>

Snohomish County deputies reported this incident on Dec. 6. On the same day, the [Monroe Police Department](#) became aware of a social media rumor that alleged a threat of violence against Monroe High School. Police responded to that and determined no credible threat existed.

Just last week, five schools in three school districts received threats of violence against the respective schools-- most of the threats were written on a bathroom stall.

A [12-year-old boy could face charges for allegedly making threats against students](#) at North Middle School in Everett.

A 14-year-old was taken into custody after social media threats to three schools in the Mukilteo School District.

The [threats had been made against Explorer, Voyager and Mariner schools](#).

The 14-year-old was taken to Denny Youth Center and was booked on six felony charges.

[In Bothell, the high school canceled class on Thursday due to a school shooting threat](#). The threat was also written on a bathroom stall.

All of these school threats come just days after a [15-year-old gunman opened fire at Oxford High School in Michigan, killing four and injuring several others](#).

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HEADLINE	12/07 Did FBI get the Proud Boys wrong?
SOURCE	https://www.newsweek.com/racist-terrorist-extremist-did-fbi-get-proud-boys-wrong-1654248
GIST	<p>Shawn Price of Rockaway, New Jersey, age 26, bragged on Facebook that he'd helped start the state's chapter of the Proud Boys. "North Jersey is my area," he posted on December 7, telling followers to meet him in Washington D.C.</p> <p>He vetted a fellow New Jersey resident who claimed to have started another chapter in the state. "So you got permission from Enrique to start your own chapter?" he asked.</p> <p>Enrique is Henry "Enrique" Tarrio, the chairman of the Proud Boys since 2018, a Cuban-American born in Miami, Florida. Once state director of Latinos for Trump and a Republican candidate for Congress, he attended the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017, the year he became involved with the Proud Boys. Tarrio was arrested on January 5 by the Metropolitan Police Department in DC.</p> <p>"No bitch. This is war," Proud Boys leader Ethan Nordean, posted on social media in response to a call for unity in embracing the results of the presidential election.</p> <p>Joe Biggs, another Proud Boys member, posted on social media a few days after the election: "It's time for a fucking war if they steal this shit." Biggs says on the Proud Boys live-streamed show "War Boys" that government officials were "evil scum, and they all deserve a traitor's death."</p> <p>"Day of the rope," Nordean responded to Biggs.</p> <p>"When police officers or government officials are breaking the law, what are we supposed to do as the people? Discourse? What are we supposed to debate? No, you have to use force."</p> <p>(After the Capitol Riot, Shawn Price allegedly messaged his mother, "I led the storm!" He, Nordean and Biggs have been indicted by the Justice Department.)</p> <p>The Proud Boys attracted significant media attention but were also probably the most inscrutable of all the groups that gathered at the Capitol: no one, including the FBI and Homeland Security, seemed to actually</p>

understand them. Founded in the last year of the Obama administration, they are an anti-left, anti-big government organization: pro the continuation of "traditional" America and anti-anything that suggests a dissolution of western dominance.

"The left, the mainstream news media, the Democratic Party, the 'swamp', the United Nations, they're all working to destroy America," says Steve, a Carlsbad, California, member of the Proud Boys. "I don't mean some white supremacy shit and I'm not even a gun owner. I mean like just protecting what we have from Antifa and Black Lives Matter and the bleeding hearts, stopping the running down of everything, removal of our history with the statues and all, screwing with the elections."

Steve, who asked that his last name not be used, attended the rally in Washington on November 14 but couldn't afford to go to a second rally in December. He felt compelled to go on January 6, he told Newsweek, because he believed that the election was indeed rigged, and he planned to march on the Capitol. He says he was on the west Capitol steps during the afternoon, part of the crowd pushing forward. But, he says, he never entered the building nor did he confront any police directly. He thought that they could indeed disrupt the electoral certification because he thought that the declaration was premature. But mostly, he says, he wanted to lend his voice to the opposition.

"The FBI interviewed me," he says, "and were interested in the video I took." But other than that, he says, no action has been taken, and none of the twenty or so southern Californians he traveled with or met have been indicted or arrested.

"You know, I like the Proud Boys, the fellowship, and I'm proud to say I marched. But the questions the FBI asked me, like the PB is some terrorist group, they were just dumb. I think I read somewhere that about 200 PB members were there on the 6th. But to say we were trying to overthrow the country or provoke a civil war—200 guys—that's ridiculous."

Steve thinks the conventional label—far right, extremist, racist, even fascist "like all over Wikipedia"—is off-base. "Is Black Lives Matter racist? Are they under a microscope like we are? Where are the mass arrests from their rampage in 2020? All of that just makes me more suspicious of the powers that be."

The Southern Poverty Law Center designates the Proud Boys a hate group; the Anti-Defamation League says it is violent, nationalistic, Islamophobic, transphobic and misogynist. Starting in 2018, Facebook started banning Proud Boys pages. But it is actually an odd combination of inclusiveness and right-wing action: its chairman is a Latino and the group has many African-American members.

A January 2021 Secret Service Protective Intelligence Brief issued just before January 6 described the organization as "a right-wing group founded in 2016 ... as a 'pro-Western fraternal organization.'" That's how it was described upon its founding, as a "fraternal organization" for young "Western chauvinist" men.

The FBI, according to a domestic intelligence analyst, says that there are about 24,000 members in more than 80 chapters, including overseas membership. He requested anonymity in order to discuss classified matters.

"Proud Boys leadership," the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) says, "has carefully crafted a public image of an inclusive club for men of all races, backgrounds and sexual orientations who subscribe to one mantra: The West (i.e. 'Western' culture) is best, and anyone who 'opposes' it ('leftists' of all stripes and feminists, among others) is the enemy."

Enrique Tarrio pushes an anti-racism slant. When Proud Boys announced that they would be marching in Charlottesville, the organization officially denounced the event and warned members that they would be banned from the group if they marched.

The Secret Service says that 2017 is the year when "demonstration activity" by the Proud Boys started entering their radar. The most prominent incident occurred in October 2018, when two members of the Proud Boys were convicted of disorderly conduct after assaulting masked protestors during a fight that

broke out in New York City when Mayor Bill de Blasio announced the creation of a new unit within the New York Police Department's intelligence bureau, dedicated to investigating terror threats from "far-right" and neo-Nazi organizations, including Proud Boys.

After the New York clash, the Philadelphia Division of the FBI reported that "unidentified ANTIFA adherents" were organizing individuals—Stand Against the Proud Boys—from across the country to "execute violence against" Independence Hall in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. ("Potential for Violence Near Independence Hall in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on 17 November 2018")

In a February 20, 2020, report ("Assembly of Improvised Explosive Device by Racially Motivated Violent Extremist Group 'Phalanx'"), the FBI Denver Division stated that a confidential human source said members of an organization called the Phalanx had created an improvised explosive device during an event where they were overrun by Antifa. The device was made out of a drinking glass, approximately two dozen two-inch-long nails, and an M-80 firecracker duct taped to the drinking glass.

"Phalanx members are known to participate in formation and riot drills at a local park in an effort to be better organized at protests and expressed having black clad individuals with shields protecting those members who were more vocal," the FBI report said.

"Phalanx membership consisted of individuals associated with the following groups: Black Shirts for Social Credit, American Identity Movement, Proud Boys, Patriot Front, Denver Anonymous, The Fourteeners, Goyim Defense League, and Blood and Honour Colorado. In addition to conducting riot drills at a local Denver park, members of the Phalanx were known to frequent a local Denver bar with the hopes of taking it over for meetings and recruit additional members."

On April 19, 2020, the leader of a Florida Proud Boys chapter posted a flyer with upcoming protests to reopen Florida's economy. He referenced a conspiracy theory that Democrats created the quarantine to destabilize the economy in an effort to remove President Trump from office.

All through 2020, the Proud Boys were active, according to a report of the Colorado Information Analysis Center (CIAC), in "spreading conspiracy theories regarding COVID-19 . Their overall messaging has called the stay-at-home orders ineffective and unconstitutional, and suggests a faction of elites are weaponizing the virus, and a vaccine would likely be a tool for population control and mind control." (CIAC is the federal government-financed statewide fusion center that works closely with the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security.)

The New Jersey Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness reported in their "2020 Terrorism Threat Assessment" that on June 29, 2020, "anarchist extremists and Proud Boys members clashed at a rally in Portland, Oregon, forcing law enforcement to declare a civil disturbance and use riot control methods to disperse the crowds. Additionally, anarchist extremists assaulted a journalist videotaping the event, resulting in a head injury."

During a campaign debate on September 29, Donald Trump told the Proud Boys to "stand back and stand by." On September 30, Trump clarified his statement, stating that he "doesn't know what the Proud Boys are" and that "they should stand down. Let law enforcement do their work." On October 1, Trump said on Sean Hannity's FOX show: "I've said it many times, and let me be clear again: I condemn the KKK. I condemn all white supremacists. I condemn the Proud Boys. I don't know much about the Proud Boys, almost nothing. But I condemn that."

Trump's implication that the Proud Boys were a white supremacist organization did indeed show that he didn't know much about them.

Asked about the social media statements promoting violence and war in America, Steve, the Proud Boys member, was unapologetic. "Sure, there are some who want violence," he told Newsweek, but he didn't see, beyond the local chapters, how anyone could think the organization is consequential or organized enough to provoke civil war.

	<p>"I hate to sound like a 'there's no one here but us chickens' kind of guy, but there were 120,000 people at the Capitol."</p> <p>He was not far off. While there were a dozen or so individual Proud Boys investigations open in the FBI prior to January 6, the domestic intelligence analyst says there were none at the national level. Of the 1.1 million homeland security threat reports circulated in the years before January 6, just 32 mentioned the Proud Boys.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/06 Police investigate threat to Monroe HS
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3269534/rumored-threat-monroe-high-school/
GIST	<p>Reports of a threat on social media prompted added security at Monroe High School on Monday.</p> <p>Paul Ryan, the Monroe police commander, told KIRO Radio that late Monday morning, a 911 caller alerted them to a Snapchat post from late last week.</p> <p>"Our officers are on scene investigating some Snapchat rumors that had circulated about potential violence occurring at the high school, but we've been unable to really identify any sort of credibility with those posts," he explained.</p> <p>Ryan says no immediate danger was discovered, but the police will continue to investigate.</p> <p>The commander also noted that the Puget Sound region has seen an unusually high number of threats at schools in recent week.</p> <p>"I think that's part of our investigation, is trying to figure out is this something that's related to something that's a little bit broader than just local to our high school," he said.</p> <p>"The more attention, I think, that we give these, that potentially could draw more events of this nature. But that doesn't take away from the fact that, obviously, we're dealing with safety with children. It's important for our department — or any — to really continue to investigate these to make sure that kids and staff are safe," Ryan said.</p> <p>The school day continued as normal Monday at Monroe High School and is being finished up on schedule, but some parents reportedly pulled their kids out of class.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/06 Wildfires broke emission records in 2021
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/business/cop/siberia-us-wildfires-broke-emissions-records-this-year-2021-12-06/
GIST	<p>BRUSSELS, Dec 6 (Reuters) - Wildfires produced a record amount of carbon emissions in parts of Siberia, the United States and Turkey this year, as climate change fanned unusually intense blazes, the European Union's Copernicus Atmosphere Monitoring Service said on Monday.</p> <p>Wildfires emitted 1.76 billion tonnes of carbon globally in 2021, Copernicus said. That's equivalent to more than double Germany's annual CO2 emissions.</p> <p>Some of the worst-hit hotspots recorded their highest wildfire emissions for any January-November period since Copernicus' dataset began in 2003, including parts of Siberia's Yakutia region, Turkey, Tunisia and the western United States.</p> <p>"We have seen extensive regions experience intense and prolonged wildfire activity. Drier and hotter regional conditions under a changing climate have increased the risk of flammability and fire risk of vegetation," said senior Copernicus scientist Mark Parrington.</p>

	<p>Globally, the wildfire emissions total wasn't the highest since 2003, but Copernicus said such emissions were likely to increase as the impacts of climate change unfold.</p> <p>Yakutia in northeastern Siberia produced its highest CO2 emissions from wildfires for any summer since 2003, while in western Siberia, a "huge number" of blazes churned out daily CO2 emissions far above the 2003-2021 average.</p> <p>In North America, fires in Canada, California and the U.S. Pacific Northwest emitted around 83 million tonnes of CO2, emitting huge smoke plumes that drifted across the Atlantic to reach Europe, Copernicus said.</p> <p>California's "Dixie fire", which ravaged nearly a million acres, was the largest recorded fire in the state's history.</p> <p>In the Mediterranean, a hot and dry summer fanned intense blazes in countries including Greece and Turkey. Thousands of people in those countries were evacuated from their homes, and Copernicus said the region's air quality deteriorated as the fires caused high levels of health-damaging particular matter.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/06 Drug trafficker jailed 4yrs: selling meth
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/drug-trafficker-sentenced-to-4-years-in-prison-for-selling-meth-in-western-wa
GIST	<p>TACOMA, Wash. - A drug trafficker was sentenced Monday to almost four years in prison for selling meth in Western Washington.</p> <p>The U.S. District Court in Tacoma sentenced 28-year-old Omar Arellano-Hernandez, of Mexico, to 46 months in prison. Arellano-Hernandez was arrested in Puyallup on April 20, 2020, after meeting to deliver more than six pounds of meth to another trafficker, who was also arrested.</p> <p>Officers learned Arellano-Hernandez was staying at a hotel in Tukwila, and seized more meth and \$34,000 in cash from his room.</p> <p>The Department of Justice says Arellano-Hernandez was in the U.S. illegally and will likely be deported after his prison term.</p> <p>"We cannot lose sight of the damage methamphetamine continues to wreak in our communities," said U.S. Attorney Nick Brown. "Overdose deaths from methamphetamine are at record high levels. Those in the grip of meth addiction struggle with the mental illness and frequently commit crimes to fuel their habit – making the community as a whole a victim of this drug trafficking."</p>
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HEADLINE	12/07 Nigeria: vaccination risk from armed gangs
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-health-religion-africa-coronavirus-vaccine-42fee2eeeb1848988a9b74a4e77a1045
GIST	<p>KUJE, Nigeria (AP) — Yunusa Bawa rolled his motorcycle away from the health care clinic where he works in Kuje, southwest of Nigeria's capital of Abuja, and secured a black box of COVID-19 vaccine for the rough ride ahead.</p> <p>The rocky and rugged pathway — Bawa described it as a road that "will make you tired" — was the least of his worries. Kidnapping along the route by armed gangs is rampant, he added.</p>

But such trips are essential if Africa's most populous country is to reach its ambitious goal of fully vaccinating 55 million of its 206 million people in the next two months.

As the emergence of the omicron variant underscores the importance of inoculating more people to prevent new mutations of the coronavirus, Nigeria also is facing a difficult path: Only 3.78 million are fully vaccinated.

Going directly to the villagers is one way to overcome any hesitancy they might have in getting the shots, said Bawa, 39.

"When you meet them in their home, there is no problem," he added. "Everybody will take (the vaccine)."

On Dec. 1, Nigeria began requiring government employees to be vaccinated or show a negative test for the virus in the past 72 hours. Although authorities emphasize the country is capable of getting the Western-manufactured vaccines to everyone, health care workers in rural areas are struggling, mostly because of delayed government funding.

At the Sabo health center in Kuje, a town of about 300,000 people near Abuja's international airport, Bawa and three colleagues work in dilapidated buildings with worn-out office equipment. In the past three months, only two of them have received compensation from the government, getting about 10,000 Nigerian naira (about \$24).

That's barely enough to cover the gas for Bawa's personal motorcycle — "the one we are using to move around and inform them that we are coming on specific dates," he said as he held the hand of 75-year-old Aminu Baodo before giving him a shot.

On a good day, he can get to about 20 people, but usually it is five or fewer. Many rural residents are poor and spend most of their time on farms scattered across the countryside, rather than in their homes in the village.

That often means a long day for Bawa and his coworkers, in addition to the risk of violence and waiting weeks for paltry compensation. He said he is unsure when he'll next be paid by the government for his efforts or how long his personal finances will hold out.

A 20-year-old colleague, Yusuf Nasiru, said he hasn't been paid or reimbursed for expenses since starting the job in November.

"If you should work on weekends, you should be paid," said Dr. Ndaeyo Iwot, executive secretary of Abuja's primary health care agency, which oversees vaccinations in the capital. He added that government workers who go out on mobile teams should have logistical support.

Armed groups in northwestern and central parts of Nigeria have killed hundreds of people this year and kidnapped thousands, seeking ransoms.

In areas not beset by violence, delayed payments to workers who transport and administer the vaccine remains "a big challenge for us," said Dr. Rilwanu Mohammed, the top government official leading vaccination efforts in Bauchi state in Nigeria's northeast.

"They won't pay the money until when the people have finished the work, and there is no money for movement from one point to another," Mohammed said, noting that he had to find funds himself to pay workers' expenses.

Others criticize the government for not adequately funding a campaign to inform people about the coronavirus and the need for vaccination.

“Nobody around here knows anything about the vaccine to be frank,” said Omorogbe Omorogiuwa, who lives in Adamawa state, which borders the country of Chad in northeastern Nigeria. “Nobody is saying you should go and take it. In fact, it is assumed that (the pandemic) is over.”

In an interview with The Associated Press, Dr. Faisal Shuaib, executive director of Nigeria’s National Primary Health Care Development Agency that oversees the vaccination program, blamed “poor planning (and) poor coordination that results in difficulties or challenges in making sure that the vaccines actually get to rural areas.”

Officials also have to battle skepticism about the vaccine in many parts of Nigeria, a deeply religious country where some religious leaders spread misinformation about the virus and the vaccine to their millions of followers.

In addition to false information spread on social media, some in northern Nigeria remember the 1996 deaths of several children from meningitis during a Pfizer clinical trial for an oral antibiotic, resulting in a legal battle with the pharmaceutical giant that won payouts for some families.

Authorities have been engaging with traditional and religious leaders to get the truth about the vaccine to their followers, Shuaib said.

“But clearly, a lot of work still needs to be done by some states in ensuring that these vaccines get to the communities,” he added, noting that Nigeria has 30 million doses on hand, with many more arriving in the coming months.

Adewunmi Emoruwa, the lead strategist at Gatefield, an Abuja-based consultancy group, said the government should be more focused on “promoting vaccine safety and efficacy,” rather than implementing a mandate for state employees. Public servants will spread the word about the vaccine if they are “convinced” it will work, he added.

Musa Ahmed, an immunization officer in Kuje, said “social mobilization has not been taken place ... and that is (why) some people are still doubting the vaccine.”

That has left a large part of Nigeria’s population unvaccinated and at “very great” risk of exposure, said Dr. Richard Mihigo, immunization and vaccines development program coordinator for the World Health Organization’s Africa regional office.

“As much as we give the opportunity to the virus to continue to circulate in a naive population, we give the virus the opportunity to mutate,” Mihigo said in an online briefing.

On Dec. 1, the Nigeria Center for Disease Control said the omicron variant was found in three travelers who arrived in the country late November — the first in West Africa to have recorded the omicron variant since scientists in southern Africa detected and reported it.

In Kaduna state, which neighbors the capital region, Bitrus Maiyaki is another health care worker taking the risk to carry vaccines to rural communities beset by violence.

“In order to support the activities of the government, we have surrendered (our lives),” Maiyaki, 41, told AP in a telephone interview from Jama’a, where he oversees vaccinations. “And we want to save lives. ... We have taken an oath to serve our fatherland. We just take the bull by the horns.”

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HEADLINE	12/06 Court cites bias; overturns convictions
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/appeals-court-cites-bias-overturns-cold-case-murder-verdict-against-seatac-man/

EVERETT, Wash. (AP) — An appeals court in Washington state on Monday overturned the cold-case murder convictions against a man accused of killing a young Canadian couple in 1987, citing juror bias.

Detectives arrested William Earl Talbott II in 2018 using the then-novel method of genetic genealogy to name him as the killer of Jay Cook and Tanya Van Cuylenborg.

Genetic genealogy involves identifying suspects by entering crime-scene DNA profiles into public databases that people have used for years to fill out their family trees.

The three appeals court judges found that one of the jurors should have been dismissed during jury selection because she said she didn't know if she could be fair. She had experience of violence against women and she did not know if she, as a mother, could be unbiased in such a case, she said.

"A flood of emotion might come over me ... and cloud my judgment," she said.

The juror, known as juror 40, was still seated by Superior Court Judge Linda Krese, who has since retired. The juror heard witness testimony for weeks and reached the guilty verdict with 11 others, following three days of deliberation.

"After her clear, repeated expressions of actual bias as to the precise nature of the allegations at the heart of this trial and evidence which would be introduced, we cannot conclude that juror 40 was sufficiently rehabilitated such that Talbott was provided a fair and impartial jury," Judge Cecily Hazelrigg wrote for the appeals court.

Prosecutors have until Jan. 5 to ask the state Supreme Court to review the appeals court ruling.

In 2019, Talbott, 58, became the first person convicted by a jury in a case involving genetic genealogy, which previously had been used to crack the Golden State Killer serial murder case and which has since been used to solve many other cases.

Talbott was sentenced to life in prison for two counts of aggravated murder in the first degree.

Talbott's appellate attorneys raised many other issues related to the evidence in the case, as did Talbott in court papers he prepared himself. The appeals court only addressed juror bias, not concerns related to genetic genealogy.

Cook and Van Cuylenborg, of Vancouver Island, were on a trip to Seattle to pick up furnace parts for Cook's father on Nov. 18, 1987. They never made it to their destination. Within days, their bodies were found many miles away, and about 65 miles apart.

Cook, 20, had been beaten, strangled and left dead beneath a blue blanket south of Monroe. Van Cuylenborg, 18, was shot in the head. A passerby found her half-naked body in wet leaves off a rural roadside north of Mount Vernon. Prosecutors believe she was raped.

No arrest was made for more than 30 years. Then a Snohomish County sheriff's detective who inherited the case, Jim Scharf, decided to try genetic genealogy, using a DNA profile from semen-stained pants found in the couple's van and semen on the young woman's body.

With the help of DNA analysis by Parabon Nanolabs, genealogist CeCe Moore traced family trees on the ancestry database GEDmatch. The mother's and father's lines intersected with the Talbotts, a Woodinville family with only one son, William.

Scharf put the SeaTac trucker under surveillance. One day in south Seattle, a coffee cup fell out of his truck. An undercover officer swooped in to collect it. Saliva on the cup came back as an apparent genetic match.

HEADLINE	12/06 NY billionaire surrenders \$70M stolen relics
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/06/arts/design/steinhardt-billionaire-stolen-antiquities.html
GIST	<p>Michael H. Steinhardt, the billionaire hedge fund pioneer and one of New York’s most prolific antiquities collectors, has surrendered 180 stolen objects valued at \$70 million and been barred for life from acquiring any other relics, the Manhattan district attorney’s office said in a statement Monday.</p> <p>The prosecutor’s office struck an agreement with Mr. Steinhardt after a four-year multinational investigation that determined that the seized pieces had been looted and smuggled from 11 countries, trafficked by 12 illicit networks and appeared on the international art market without lawful paperwork, the office said.</p> <p>“For decades, Michael Steinhardt displayed a rapacious appetite for plundered artifacts without concern for the legality of his actions, the legitimacy of the pieces he bought and sold, or the grievous cultural damage he wrought across the globe,” District Attorney Cyrus Vance Jr. said, adding: “This agreement establishes that Steinhardt will be subject to an unprecedented lifetime ban on acquiring antiquities.”</p> <p>Mr. Steinhardt, a Brooklyn native who turns 81 on Tuesday, is a major contributor to New York University and to numerous Jewish philanthropies. There is a Steinhardt conservatory at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden and a Steinhardt Gallery at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.</p> <p>In a statement on Monday, his lawyer, Andrew J. Levander, said: “Mr. Steinhardt is pleased that the District Attorney’s yearslong investigation has concluded without any charges, and that items wrongfully taken by others will be returned to their native countries. Many of the dealers from whom Mr. Steinhardt bought these items made specific representations as to the dealers’ lawful title to the items, and to their alleged provenance. To the extent these representations were false, Mr. Steinhardt has reserved his rights to seek recompense from the dealers involved.”</p> <p>According to prosecutors, 171 of the 180 seized antiquities first surfaced in the possession of accused antiquities traffickers, including two who have been convicted in Italy — Giacomo Medici and Giovanni Becchina. They said the investigation revealed that 101 of the items, all covered in dirt and encrustations, were visible and identifiable in photographs found in the possession of known traffickers.</p> <p>Christos Tsirogiannis, an associate professor at the University of Aarhus Institute of Advanced Studies in Denmark, who specializes in searching photographic archives seized from antiquities dealers, said traffickers use such photos to advertise their looted wares to small groups of wealthy collectors. Dr. Tsirogiannis is one of about 60 researchers, investigators and foreign law enforcement officials credited by the prosecutors’ office with assisting in the case.</p> <p>As part of its inquiry, Mr. Vance’s office said, prosecutors executed 17 search warrants and worked with officials in 11 countries — Bulgaria, Egypt, Greece, Iraq, Israel, Italy, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Syria, and Turkey.</p> <p>In explaining the agreement not to prosecute so long as Mr. Steinhardt abides by all its terms, Mr. Vance said the arrangement would allow for the items to be “returned expeditiously to their rightful owners” rather than being held as evidence. It would also help his office to “shield the identity of the many witnesses here and abroad whose names would be released at any trial.”</p> <p>Nonetheless, the case and other recent seizures demonstrate that the office’s Antiquities Trafficking Unit is ready to reach far back in time to confiscate objects based on a New York state statute that allows prosecutors to return stolen property to its “rightful owners” regardless of when a theft might have occurred.</p> <p>Mr. Steinhardt’s dealings with prosecutors over suspect antiquities date back to the 1990s. In 1997, a federal judge ruled that Mr. Steinhardt had illegally imported a golden bowl, known as a phiale, from Italy in 1992. The object, dating to 450 B.C. and costing \$1 million, was seized from Mr. Steinhardt’s home in</p>

1995. The judge rejected his contention at the time that he was an “innocent owner” with no knowledge of irregularities.

In 2018, investigators [raided his office](#) and Fifth Avenue home and took away several ancient works they said had been looted from Greece and Italy. That seizure came on the heels of a 2017 seizure of a marble statue stolen from a temple in Sidon, Lebanon, which Mr. Steinhardt relinquished and which has been returned.

The 2017 seizure led to the formation of the trafficking unit, which pressed the case that was resolved on Monday. Officials said the unit has recovered more than 3,000 items valued at \$200 million, and that at least 1,500 have been returned to their owners and countries of origin. It said hundreds are ready to be repatriated “as soon as the relevant countries are able to receive them amid the pandemic,” and more than 1,000 objects are being held awaiting the outcome of criminal proceedings.

(Separately, in March 2019, Mr. Steinhardt was accused [of a pattern of sexual harassment](#) by several women who worked for the nonprofits he supported.)

The confiscated items, which decorated Mr. Steinhardt’s homes and offices, and which he often lent to major museums, came mostly from Italy, Greece and Israel, according to a list compiled by investigators.

They include:

- A ceremonial libations vessel, or rhyton, that depicts a stag’s head, purchased from the Merrin Gallery of Manhattan for \$2.6 million in November 1991. Officials said the item, which dates to 400 B.C., first appeared on the international art market without provenance after rampant looting in Milas, Turkey. In March 1993, prosecutors said, Mr. Steinhardt lent it to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where it was when law enforcement officials seized it. It has since been repatriated.
- A larnax, or small chest for human remains, from Crete, that dates between 1400-1200 B.C. Officials said the item, valued at \$1 million, was purchased from a known antiquities trafficker and traced to Mr. Steinhardt through a financial institution based in Malta.
- The “Ercolano Fresco,” purchased from Robert Hecht, who had faced accusations of trafficking in antiquities, “with no prior provenance” for \$650,000 in November 1995. Dating to 50 B.C. and valued at \$1 million, it depicts an infant Hercules strangling a snake sent by Hera to slay him. The fresco was looted in 1995 from a Roman villa in the ruins of Herculaneum, near Naples, officials said.
- A gold bowl looted from Nimrud, Iraq, and purchased without provenance papers, officials said, for \$150,000 in July 2020, at a time when objects from Nimrud were being trafficked by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant. Made of gold with a scalloped-flower design, the object surfaced in October 2019 when a Customs and Border Protection officer notified Mr. Vance’s office that someone on a flight from Hong Kong to Newark was hand-carrying the bowl for Mr. Steinhardt.
- Three stone death masks that appeared to be encrusted with soil in photographs recovered by the Israeli authorities. They date to 6000 B.C. and were purchased by Mr. Steinhardt for \$400,000 in October 2007.

Prosecutors said Mr. Steinhardt had owned and traded more than 1,000 antiquities since 1987, and his art collection was valued at about \$200 million.

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HEADLINE	12/06 DOJ: Emmett Till investigation closed
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/06/us/emmett-till-investigation-closed.html
GIST	ATLANTA — The Justice Department announced on Monday that it had closed an investigation into the abduction and murder of Emmett Till , the African American teenager whose gruesome killing by two white men more than six decades ago in Mississippi helped begin the civil rights movement.

In a news release dated Dec. 6, federal officials said there was not enough evidence to pursue charges in the case, which was reopened after a historian claimed in a book that Carolyn Bryant Donham, the central witness whose account of an encounter with Emmett led to his death, had [recanted the most salacious portions of her story](#) — that he had grabbed her and made sexually suggestive remarks.

Citing the statute of limitations and Ms. Donham's denial that she had ever changed her story, the Justice Department said it could not move forward with prosecuting her for perjury.

During a moment of the trial in which jurors were not present, Ms. Donham claimed that the teenager had made sexually vulgar comments toward her and physical contact. But in a book published in 2017, "The Blood of Emmett Till" by Timothy B. Tyson, the author wrote that Ms. Donham had recanted her testimony in a 2008 interview, saying that the earlier stories she told were "not true."

"Nothing that boy did could ever justify what happened to him," Mr. Tyson, a researcher and historian at Duke University, quoted Ms. Donham as saying in the book.

Mr. Tyson's claim generated outrage and renewed calls for the case to be reopened. Kristen Clarke, who leads the Justice Department's civil rights division, delivered the news to the family in person that the case was formally closed.

In a statement on Monday, the Justice Department said Mr. Tyson, despite saying he had recorded two interviews with Ms. Donham, provided just one recording to the F.B.I. that did not contain a recantation.

Mr. Tyson has said that although he did not record Ms. Donham's recantation, he took detailed notes.

"Carolyn started spilling the beans before I got the recorder going. I documented her words carefully," Mr. Tyson said in an email on Monday, adding, "My reporting is rock solid."

At a news conference in Chicago on Monday afternoon, Emmett's family members said they were disappointed by the result of the investigation but were not surprised.

"I did not expect that they would have found any new evidence," said Ollie Gordon, one of Emmett's cousins, adding, "I ask where do we go from here."

The Rev. Wheeler Parker Jr., Emmett's cousin and best friend who was in the Mississippi Delta house when Emmett was kidnapped in the middle of the night, said the conclusion of the investigation marked the end of a painful 66 years for Emmett's loved ones.

"Today is a day that we will never forget," he said. "For 66 years we have suffered pain for his loss, and I suffered tremendously because of the way that they painted him."

Ms. Donham, 87, has rarely spoken publicly about the case. Her former husband and another man confessed to Emmett's murder, though the confessions came after they were acquitted by an all-white jury. Both men are dead.

In the summer of 1955, 14-year-old Emmett traveled from Chicago to the Mississippi Delta to visit relatives. One day in August, he walked into a store in Money, Miss., run by Ms. Donham and her husband, Roy Bryant, to buy candy. Accounts vary about what happened, but a witness said that Emmett whistled at Ms. Donham.

Days later, Mr. Bryant and his half brother abducted, tortured and shot the teenager. Then they tied a 75-pound cotton gin fan around his neck and tossed his body into a river. His corpse, broken, battered and mutilated, was retrieved from the water on the last day of August.

Mamie Till, Emmett's mother, insisted on an open coffin for the funeral and allowed photographs to be published in Jet magazine — ensuring that “the whole nation had to bear witness” to what is considered among the worst hate crimes of the 20th century.

Despite the passage of time and the civil rights movement, Emmett's death has never faded from public memory. It has often been invoked as an [enduring symbol of deep, unbridled racism](#). Historic markers erected at sites connected to his death have repeatedly been vandalized. The marker near the river where his body was found has been replaced at least three times because it has been [vandalized and damaged by bullets](#).

“Mississippi has never escaped the story of Emmett Till and nor should it,” said Susan Glisson, who worked with the town of Sumner, Miss., which issued a public apology and formed the Emmett Till Memorial Commission.

In closing its investigation, the Justice Department said that Ms. Donham denied ever recanting her earlier testimony. In 2018, Ms. Donham's daughter-in-law, Marsha Holley Bryant, who was present for the interviews with Mr. Tyson, [said that Ms. Donham never recanted](#).

Reached by phone on Monday, Ms. Holley Bryant said she had no comment. Other relatives of Ms. Donham did not respond to several requests for comment.

Before the current investigation, federal officials last revisited the case in 2004. They closed it two years later after prosecutors determined that the statute of limitations kept them from pursuing additional federal charges. As part of that inquiry, [Emmett's body was exhumed](#).

The latest investigation was part of the Justice Department's larger review of cases believed to be motivated by racial hatred. Over the past 15 years, the department has led several successful investigations, including the prosecution of [Edgar Ray Killen](#). Mr. Killen, who died in prison about four years ago, was a former Klansman who arranged the murders of three civil workers in Mississippi in 1964.

“Cold cases never close,” said Keith Beauchamp, a filmmaker and producer of “The Untold Story of Emmett Louis Till” and the upcoming film “Till.”

“There still may be a way,” he continued, “to revisit one of the greatest injustices committed upon a child in American history.”

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HEADLINE	12/06 Chicago: shootings, beatings; 21 arrests
SOURCE	https://chicago.cbslocal.com/2021/12/06/loop-chaos-arrests-flash-mob-shooting/
GIST	<p>CHICAGO (CBS) — It's becoming a familiar sight: chaos in the Loop. It happened again Saturday night with large crowds, a shooting and beatings. An officer was left with a broken arm, and police arrested more 21 young people</p> <p>Dozens flooded the streets near Millennium Park in a similar sight to last summer. A Chicago Transit Authority bus driver was beaten in the road and injured. A teenager was shot in the arm when a gunman fired after the victim bumped into him. A convenience store worker was also punched in the face.</p> <p>Of the 21 arrested, at least one — a 15-year-old — is facing a felony battery charge.</p> <p>Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot spoke out on what needs to change, while others have their own solutions. “We shouldn't have to get to that point, but if we do, we will,” she said.</p> <p>Lightfoot said when the chaos erupted one tactic used by police was to push people toward trains to go home from Millennium Park where they were gathered.</p>

	<p>Second Ward Ald. Brian Hopkins, who has worked with the Chicago Police Department on Loop crowd control in the past, said officers had intel of social media influencers organizing this as an event or flash mob. CPD would not go into deployment details, but they have had much experience responding to similar crowds as recently as July 4th weekend when officers arrested more than 60 people.</p> <p>Lightfoot says the real work to fix this problem starts at home.</p> <p>“These kids have to take responsibility, but I’m going to say the parents have to take responsibility,” she said. “Do you know where your kid is? Are you making sure that you’re talking to your children about how they should act in a large crowd?”</p> <p>Community leader Tyrone Muhammad, who works with young Black people, took it further, saying groups like his should be a part of the solution by helping relate to kids better and diffuse situations on the ground in a different way.</p> <p>“Let’s create the opportunities so our children can feel like they belong in downtown,” the founder of Ex-Cons for Community and Social Change. “Not that it’s an event to come downtown. Downtown shouldn’t be an event. It should be something that feels normal and natural because we live in this city.”</p> <p>CPD says it did work with street outreach workers to coordinate with officers, calling their response “sufficient.” Officers also recovered two replica guns and issued nine curfew violations.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/06 Group: 3 kidnapped missionaries released
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/06/world/americas/hostages-haiti.html
GIST	<p>MEXICO CITY — Three more hostages from a group of 17 missionaries kidnapped in Haiti have been released, the American Christian charity they were with said on Monday. Their release brought the total number of people freed to five.</p> <p>In a statement on Monday, Christian Aid Ministries said that the three people released “are safe and seem to be in good spirits.”</p> <p>The organization did not provide their names, ages or the circumstances of their release, including whether a ransom had been paid. In the past, the group had asked for discretion to protect the hostages still being held.</p> <p>“We would like to focus the next three days on praying and fasting for the hostages,” the statement read. The group continued, “We long for all the hostages to be reunited with their loved ones. Thank you for your prayer support.”</p> <p>Two hostages from the Ohio-based charity were released on Nov. 21.</p> <p>The kidnapped group, which included 16 Americans and one Canadian, was taken in October by a gang called 400 Mawozo, in a neighborhood of Port-au-Prince, the Haitian capital. Swaths of the city have come under control of criminal groups amid the escalating political and economic crisis that followed the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse, in July.</p> <p>Among those kidnapped were five children. Kidnapping has become an increasingly common practice for Haitian gangs, who have targeted even students going to school and pastors delivering sermons.</p> <p>The 400 Mawozo gang, which is well-known for orchestrating mass kidnappings, had initially demanded a ransom of \$1 million per person, although that was widely viewed as a starting sum for negotiations. It is not clear what, if any, money was paid for the five people released so far.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/06 SC teen arrest: threat school shooting plot
SOURCE	https://www.foxnews.com/us/south-carolina-high-schooler-arrested-allegedly-threatening-shoot-up-school
GIST	<p>South Carolina sheriff's deputies arrested a 14-year-old male high school student Monday on charges that he threatened to shoot up schools in his county, authorities said.</p> <p>The Lexington County Sheriff's Office said the Gilbert High School student made a "threatening statement" while on the bus last Thursday, and another student overheard them.</p> <p>The student told school administrators that he heard the other student allegedly talking about wearing a trench coat the next day and shooting up an elementary school and a middle school, according to an incident report cited by the sheriff's office.</p> <p>"The student who came forward should be commended for doing the right thing," Lexington County Sheriff Jay Koon said. "They heard something and reported all the details to someone who could immediately step and take action to make sure everyone stayed safe.</p> <p>"While there was never any imminent danger to students, teachers or anyone else on a campus, this is another example of how we and Lexington School District share in the responsibility to protect those who learn and work at school."</p> <p>The student, whose identity has not been publicly released, was released from custody after he was charged, the sheriff's office said. He is due to appear in a Lexington Family Court at a later date.</p> <p>The Lexington School District sent out a message to families. The district said a GHS administrator had notified law enforcement, which investigated and determined there was no immediate danger to students or staff.</p> <p>The district said it has suspended the student, and he faces expulsion.</p> <p>"We are proud of the student who came forward to report the threat," the district said. "This situation is another example of how we must work together to keep each other safe. We take threats seriously and take swift and stern action against those making threats against our schools."</p> <p>The student's arrest came less than a week after a 15-year-old allegedly opened fire at his high school in Oxford, Michigan, killing four fellow students and wounding six others, including a teacher. He has been charged as an adult with murder, terrorism, and other crimes in the attack.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/06 Panama: large presence Gulf Clan cartel
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/panama-uncovers-extensive-presence-colombian-cartel-81594733
GIST	<p>PANAMA CITY -- The Colombian drug gang known as the Gulf Clan cartel controls over half the cocaine shipments that travel through Panama, and had established an extensive logistics and money laundering network in the global transportation hub, authorities said Monday.</p> <p>John Dornheim, Panama's police chief, said the cartel has been infiltrating the country's business sector, which is largely based on the Panama Canal and banking services.</p> <p>"Seven million containers a year move through the country's ports two on the Pacific side and three on the Caribbean, and that fuels the country's legal economy," Dornheim. "The (criminal) gangs use the country's legal services to carry out illegal activities."</p> <p>Dornheim said 70% percent of Panama's homicides are linked to drug trafficking.</p>

	<p>The statements came days after Panamanian authorities seized \$10 million in cash and arrested 57 people in different raids. Among those arrested were government employees and members of security agencies. Dozens of properties and vehicles were also seized in last week's raids.</p> <p>Security Minister Juan Manuel Pino said more arrests are possible, as the extent of the cartel's network in Panama is uncovered.</p> <p>"All of a sudden more people are coming out as being involved in the administrative side, bank accounts, front men," Pino said, "because a lot of them were involved in laundering money."</p> <p>The cartel controls the Caribbean route through other Central American countries; cocaine is then shipped to the United States.</p> <p>Pino said Panama has seized 119 tons of drugs so far this year, a record, and well ahead of the 95 tons seized in 2019.</p> <p>The Gulf cartel is based in northern Colombia near the border with Panama.</p> <p>El Clan del Golfo opera en una zona del Caribe próxima a la frontera colombo-panameña. Previamente, las autoridades de Panamá capturaron a algunos de los líderes de esa organización que luego extraditó a Estados Unidos.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/06 Arrest: threats to 2021 NYC Pride March
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/man-arrested-threatening-attack-lgbtq-community-guns-bombs/story?id=81586884
GIST	<p>A suburban New York man threatened to attack the 2021 New York City Pride March with "firepower" that would "make the 2016 Orlando Pulse Nightclub shooting look like a cakewalk," federal prosecutors said Monday.</p> <p>Robert Fehring, 74, of Bayport, New York, allegedly sent at least 60 letters threatening to assault, shoot and bomb LGBTQ-affiliated individuals, organizations and businesses. He was arrested Monday morning and was released later that day on a \$100,000 bond.</p> <p>Fehring was placed on home detention with location monitoring, and he is not permitted to have firearms or other destructive devices. He is also not permitted to have contact with any victims and may not go to certain locations he threatened.</p> <p>A search of Fehring's home last month turned up photographs from a 2021 Pride event in East Meadow, New York, two loaded shotguns, hundreds of rounds of ammunition, two stun guns and a stamped envelope addressed to an LGBTQ-affiliated attorney containing the remains of a dead bird, federal prosecutors said.</p> <p>"As alleged, the defendant's hate-filled invective and threats of violence directed at members of the LGBTQ community have no place in our society and will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law," United States Attorney Breon Peace said.</p> <p>Forty-nine people were killed, and dozens were injured in the mass shooting Fehring reportedly referenced at Pulse nightclub, an LGBTQ nightclub in Orlando, Florida, in June 2016.</p> <p>Fehring has reportedly been sending these kinds of threatening letters since at least 2013, according to the unsealed criminal complaint. In them, he threatened the use of firearms and explosives.</p>

	<p>Along with the letter threatening the New York City Pride March -- in which he wrote there would "be radio-cont[r]olled devices placed at numerous strategic places" -- the criminal complaint also quoted from a letter Fehring allegedly sent to the organizer of the Pride event in East Meadow.</p> <p>"[W]e were right there you...FREAK!!! They couldn't get a shot off at you, slithering around the back stage area like a snake. Too many cops. Very disappointed. But your time has come. ... They are out to KILL you....and your boyfriend. You are being watched. No matter how long it takes, you will be taken out.... high-powered bullet.... bomb....knife.... whatever it takes," the letter said.</p>
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